

The Trope of Postmodernity in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing how Tim O'Brien, a veteran of the Vietnam War, reviews the American involvement in the conflict in his novel *The Things They Carried* (1990). The author shows the perspective of the soldiers in the stories and, therefore, presents other possibilities to analyze that historical fact. The interplay of fiction and truth is essential for O'Brien to reach the objective of reevaluating official history in order to make the readers rethink the past.

Keywords: Tim O'Brien; *The Things They Carried*; Vietnam War; truth; fiction; Postmodernism.

Vietnam War, Fiction, Totalization, etc.

The Vietnam War has been the subject of many books, films, documentaries, which attempt to find the reasons why American troops took part in the armed fighting and the outcome of this action. Thus, different forms of art are helpful in the process of trying to depict diverse views of the past.

"I think fiction rescues history from its confusions," states the American writer Don DeLillo (In DePietro, 2005, p.64). Undoubtedly, postmodern fiction has contributed to this task by presenting multiple perspectives to approach historical occurrences in order to reevaluate them. Moreover, according to Linda Hutcheon (1993), postmodern fiction challenges the notion of "totalization," showing that there is no closure to the analysis of a certain fact, only problematization. Her concept of "historiographic metafiction" is important to examine novels that reevaluate history and also to address the act of writing itself. The novelist goes back to the archives ("composed of texts," and therefore, "open to all kinds of use and abuse" [Hutcheon, 1993, p.80]), to contest their discourses, to write other representations of the once unquestioned version of official history (the 'Total history' [is] de-totalized [Hutcheon, 1993, p.62]), leaving the readers free to elaborate their own ideas about a historical moment. Brian McHale points out that "In postmodernist revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming "true" history—and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle. But, of course, this is precisely the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?" (1987, p.96) How can people really say that what they know about the past is true?

Hutcheon inquires “Which ‘facts’ make it into history? And whose facts?” (p.71), to show that instead of getting to know only the history of the winners, “we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as man” (p.66). Thus, postmodernism has given the formerly silenced ones the opportunity of being heard, and this is what the American writer Tim O’Brien, a veteran of the Vietnam war, does in his novel *The Things They Carried* (1990), since the point of view of the soldiers is privileged in the series of short stories that form the book.

The Things They Carried

The narrator O’Brien, either the author himself or a narrator created to tell the story, states that he was against the war, but was drafted and the only possibility that he could see of not going to Vietnam would be to flee to Canada. However, he is totally unsure of what to do, since he knows that it could mean a great shame to him and his family, for he was born in a small town in which people were conservative. In his thoughts, he had arguments with his townspeople. He hated their “simpleminded patriotism” (1998, p.45). He was astonished and felt repugnance at their lack of historical knowledge and alienation. However, O’Brien was not brave enough to face them, what they would say about him if he had chosen not to go (“the damned sissy had taken off for Canada” [p.45]). But is it bravery to fight a war that you think is wrong just because you received a draft card? The author shows that in Vietnam the soldiers did not only carry the necessary equipment according to the mission (“What they carried varied by mission” [p.9]), but also “all the emotional baggage of men who might die” (p.21). Furthermore, it was important to maintain their reputations: “They died so as not to die of embarrassment” (p.21). It would be very difficult to face dishonor, so they tolerated the rough and strenuous path.

Led by First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the Alpha Company was in a mission to find and destroy tunnels built by the Viet Congs, and the soldiers worried about a variety of issues: “If you screamed, how far would the sound carry? Would your buddies hear it? Would they have the courage to drag you out? In some respects, though not many, the waiting was worse than the tunnel itself. Imagination was a killer” (p.11). Through this passage, the reader notices that the young men were simply subjected to dangerous situations for which they did not have enough experience and, this way, their imagination tortured them tremendously.

Actually, Lieutenant Cross, who carried letters and photos of his beloved Martha, had never wanted “the responsibility of leading” those soldiers (p.167); “he had no desire to command” (p.168), and always felt guilty for the deaths of his men. During this mission to search for tunnels and make them useless, one of the soldiers, Ted Lavender, was “shot dead in the head on his way back from peeing” (p.12). Kiowa, another soldier, described the scene as “—just boom, then down—not like the movies where the dead guy rolls around and does fancy spins and goes ass over teakettle—not like that, Kiowa said, the poor bastard just flat fuck fell, Boom Down. Nothing else” (p.6). Lieutenant Cross felt guilty for Lavender’s death, because he could not stop thinking about Martha.

After the corpse was taken away, the Alpha Company burned everything they found in the village of Than Khe (“They shot chickens and dogs” [p.16]). The account of what happened to Ted Lavender destroys any illusion presented in war movies. Death is simply “boom, down,” there is nothing like the movies in which there are “fancy spins.” On the ground there are no special effects; actually, there is just a subtle line separating life and death. A soldier is alive at one moment, and, suddenly, is dead. What is left for the others is to feel the anguish, laugh, and move ahead, carrying Vietnam (“the place, the soil” [p.15]). The soldiers were the ones who had to endure, who carried all the scars and the suffering. Their revenge was to set fire to Than Khe. But the question still stands: for what? After many years the war was over, Jimmy Cross told O’Brien that “he’d never forgiven himself for Lavender’s death” (p. 27). The narrator is forty-three years old and he still remembers his friends of the platoon, whose average age “was nineteen or twenty” (p.37); he thought of what they did, of what they said. Even though his daughter tells him to write another kind of story, he cannot do it. He wants to tell the stories about the war, as if they were going to save other people by preventing the same thing from happening again. The importance of his telling stories is to make readers understand that the soldiers were young and did not know the place where they were fighting. Moreover, the Company did not have a clear objective:

They marched for the sake of the march. [...] They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then to other villages, where it would always be the same. (p.15)

The absence of strategy caused many deaths. When Ted Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross “felt shame” and “hated himself” (p.16). Therefore, the inexperience of the soldiers added to confused military operations led to disastrous results.

O’Brien narrates the deaths of other two soldiers, Kiowa and Curt Lemon. One way of narrating Kiowa’s death in a shit field is through a story of an imagined conversation that Norman Bowker, then a veteran, would have had with his father, who “was at home watching baseball on national TV,” Sally, whose picture Norman used to carry in his wallet, but she had gotten married, and Max, a friend “who was drowned” (p.139). Bowker’s father wanted him to win medals and he did, seven of them. He would tell his father and friends about the medal he did not win. Norman would explain that Kiowa died when the boys of the platoon were at the Song Tra Bong River and it was raining very heavily. There was the river and the bad smell. So, they realized that they “were camped in a goddamn shit field” (p.148). He heard Kiowa screaming, “but when he got there Kiowa was almost completely under. [...] He pulled hard, but Kiowa was gone” [...] (p.149). Norman could have talked about the war to the people in his town, but they would not listen to him. Just like the people who lived in O’ Brien’s town, war stories did not matter. Norman’s town “had no memory, therefore no guilt. [...] It did not know shit about shit and did not care to know” (p.143). It was hard for Norman Bowker to find meaning for his life again after the war. He wrote a letter to O’ Brien asking him to write about his meaningless life in his town (he ends up hanging himself) and also about Kiowa’s death. At

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At the end of the story called “Notes,” O’Brien admitted that “Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own” (p.161). The readers are left without knowing if any part of the story really happened.

At another point in the narrative, O’Brien focuses again on the anxieties Lieutenant Cross felt, this time due to Kiowa’s death. Actually, Cross was “unprepared” (p.168) to lead the group, even after he had been in Vietnam for several months, since he did not know how “to keep his men out of a shit field” (p.168). He was going to write a letter to Kiowa’s father admitting his fault, explaining that the Song Tra Bong had overflowed its banks and the problem with the mortar fire that exploded the field. It was “a stupid mistake” that “had killed Kiowa” (p.168). This is one of the ways O’Brien is able to show the everlasting pain carried by war veterans.

The wrongfulness of the war led people to the streets in order to protest against the American interference to avoid the so-called and feared “domino effect.” According to Robert N. Bellah “Vietnam was very much part of cold war strategy, justified by the famous domino theory, namely that if South Vietnam fell, all of Southeast Asia would follow” (In Hauerwas & Lentricchia, 2003, p.15). The effects of the Vietnam War to the United States were extremely serious and the country still fears that someday a “new Vietnam” may happen. Bellah points out that:

Our involvement in the war, which began gradually in 1964- 65 and ended ignominiously in 1975, had by 1969 required 540,000 American troops on the ground. Over the course of the war we sustained more than 50,000 dead, and the Vietnamese well over a million. In addition to indiscriminate bombing and the killing of civilians in ground warfare, we engaged in widespread chemical warfare (Agent Orange), the effects of which are still being suffered by some Vietnam veterans in this country, as well as many in Vietnam. Devastating though the war was for the Vietnamese, the consequences for American society, from which, wishful thinking to the contrary, we are still suffering, were extraordinary, making in many ways an important social and political turning point. (In Hauerwas & Lentricchia, p.16)

Norman Mailer, in the book *The Armies of the Night* (1968), approaches one of those demonstrations, the protest which occurred in Washington D.C, on October 21, 1967. The demonstrators faced the soldiers and tried to hold a conversation with them, as it is shown in the following passage: ““Hey, soldier, you think I’m a freak. Why am I against the war in Vietnam? Cause it’s wrong. You’re not defending America against Communism, you’re just giving your officers a job” (1994, p.259). The U.S. would withdraw the troops years after this protest and, till then, many lives of young Americans were to be lost without any reason. O’Brien opposed the Vietnam War fiercely, because he thought it was a wrong war. He explains that it was possible for him to understand a war to fight “a Hitler or some comparable evil” (p.44), but not a war without a strictly defined objective.

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