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On *The Things They Carried* as an Antiwar Novel

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien employs a masterful blend of storytelling and personal experience to evince in the reader a sense of confusion that parallels the confusion experienced by the soldiers fighting in Vietnam and the people living on the home front during the war. Throughout the book, O’Brien fuses the confusion and chaos of combat with the uncertainty and controversy that formed the core of the overarching debate about the Vietnam War’s purpose and the methods used to carry it out. By calling into question the very veracity of the stories he presents as true, he forces the reader to doubt not only what they read, but also what they have heard about the war. While O’Brien’s obfuscation of what is true and what is fiction makes it very difficult to find a stable point from which to judge the war by any sort of concrete standard, it also forces the reader to look at war from a very personal perspective. For O’Brien, it is not the facts of war that matter, but the emotions which war evokes in someone who has experienced it and its consequences.

Readers who were not alive during the period obviously cannot experience these kinds of emotions firsthand, but what they can do is experience the same kinds of emotions, the same discomfort and absence of black and white facts upon which to base their belief. By using examples that express the complex feelings that he felt within the context of the war, O’Brien provides a way for readers to access a spectrum of emotional data that, while necessarily distorted by time and method of delivery, is close to that of O’Brien’s own experience. By reading the vignettes that O’Brien provides, the reader is meant to attain a state wherein they might judge what war is really like, something that numbers, dates, and factual accounts cannot adequately express.

O’Brien explicitly states that, “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth…stories can…make things present,” (O’Brien 172). For most people, it can be assumed that reading something along the lines of ‘many soldiers died in Vietnam after stepping on landmines’ does not conjure up a picture that adequately captures the weight of the statement because the set of information it conveys is too large and vague to be brought immediately before the minds eye. By way of contrast, reading “There was a noise, I suppose, which must’ve been the detonator, so I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight…when he died it was almost beautiful,” (O’Brien 67) paints a picture which is much more interactive and personal. It doesn’t matter that the story of Lemon’s death isn’t real, what matters is that the reader’s *impression* of Lemon’s death is, and that that impression occurs in the present, in a way that the reader can actively reflect on.

O’Brien employs this strategy many times over the course of the narrative, and what is striking is that when the narrator sees characters die, or relates the stories of men witnessing death, the greatest emphasis is not placed on the fact that they are dead, but some other detail, like the star-shaped hole where the eye of the man he killed had been (O’Brien 124), or how “[Kiowa’s] wristwatch gave off a green…shine as it slipped beneath the thick waters,” (O’Brien 143). In this way, O’Brien seeks to convey the idea that it isn’t the fact that war leads to death that makes it so terrible, but rather that war is terrible because the deaths it leads to are so brutal and unnatural. It could also be argued that O’Brien intends to send the message that in war, death becomes so routine that the mere cessation of life loses its meaning on a personal level- that what makes one death stand out is the way that it differs from the other. The decision to portray death in this manner, rather than in an impersonal one, is clear evidence that O’Brien intended *The Things They Carried* as an antiwar novel. It is hard to support war after internalizing such visceral images and strange concepts.

The story of the “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” while fictional, is perhaps the most terrifying example of O’Brien’s technique of emotional transfer at work. The way that Mary Anne is transformed from a naive high school graduate to a “part of the land…wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues… [d]angerous…ready for the kill,” (O’Brien 110), through her experiences in-country traces the psychological journey from draftee to veteran made by many soldiers in Vietnam, as well as the way in which the face of the war at its outset was changed by the unique challenges presented by the nature of the enemy, the land, and the increasingly blurry motives for fighting. The track of Mark Fossie’s fading connection with Mary Anne is strikingly similar to the way that the popular opinion and support of the American public drifted away from the men fighting in Vietnam as the war dragged on. The practically Lovecraftian manner in which the story of Mary Anne’s descent into madness is told unsettles the reader in a manner that is entirely beyond the scope of any discussion of these real-world trends. It is one thing to know that the Vietnam War was a war fought for vague reasons, with never-before-seen levels of antiwar sentiment on the home front, and to see that these conditions contributed to the disillusionment of the men on the ground with those in command. It is something else entirely to *feel* something close to what O’Brien felt because of those conditions. It is a gut-twisting horror, one that starts innocently enough with the expectation of a happy ending, then it starts to slide faster and faster into a story which the reader knows isn’t going to end well, and then it slides right past the far end of what the reader was prepared to accept. It is so far from a true story as to be ludicrous in its intensity. Yet the feelings of abject terror and repulsion, the desire to make it stop, to shake Mary Anne out of it, to end the war, to end all war if it meant that there would never again be the risk of another Mary Anne losing her way and being swallowed up by insanity- those feelings are real. That is the crux of O’Brien’s message.

So long as the reader experiences O’Brien’s prose in the way in which he intended it to be experienced, in a constant state of wondering what is true, what is based on truth, and what is fiction, open to the empathetic requirements which full engagement with the narrative relies on to function, then they will inevitably experience an antiwar novel. The state of constant flux ensures that the reader has little to fall back on for the purposes of judging the war except for their own personal reactions to the stories that O’Brien tells about it. O’Brien is not concerned with reporting fact; he is concerned with conveying truth. The truth he attempts to convey is one that leaves little argument for war in its wake. While the degree to which he succeeds in his mission is purely subjective, as some readers may find that O’Brien’s stories do not have the intended effect and feel nothing intense enough to change their personal viewpoints, the fact remains that the structure and mechanism of the argument against war which O’Brien is attempting to make is plainly visible, regardless of its effectiveness on a case-by-case basis. This being the case, it is clear that *The Things They Carried* is an antiwar novel.