**RESEARCH QUESTION: How does Tim O’Brien’s use of the literary techniques prevalent in *The Things They Carried* contribute to the storytelling and memory themes present in the stories?**

People use storytelling to pass down traditions in an easily understandable way, socialize with like-minded individuals, and cope with issues that might be too hard to talk about in a normal manner. In unique literary structures, such as poems, songs, or anthologies, the benefits are only amplified rather than reduced -- audiences can digest material in a new way, remember it better, and spread the information to more people. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's use of the structure and benevolent euphemisms contribute to the storytelling and memory themes prevalent throughout the book, demonstrating the importance of relatable media in showing the unique mechanisms that humans use to cope in a horrible situation.

O’Brien’s use of fragmented structure and repetition while writing TTTC supports the theme of storytelling as a way to cope. O’Brien uses the fragmented nature of the short stories to symbolize both the structure of a veteran’s mind and the events in a war, and one’s effect on another. The disjointed nature of the stories offers a glimpse into O’Brien’s mind -- the constant retelling of events like Kiowa’s death (*In the Field*, where multiple soldiers are searching for Kiowa’s body, and his death is retold two to three times, and *Speaking of Courage*, where it is told from the perspective of Norman Bowker, whose character development is the most affected by Kiowa’s death -- he is very conflicted on what he could have done and what he should have done during that night) show the effect on O’Brien’s (and Norman Bowker’s) mind. This repetition shows the importance that O’Brien places on these stories and how he needs them to stay sane -- in *Notes,* O’Brien says that “the act of writing had led me through a swirl of emotions that might have otherwise ended in paralysis or worse.”. The stories themselves also reflect the state of O’Brien’s mind when he is writing -- he jumps from an anecdote heard from a friend (*On The Rainy River*) to a funny memory from the war (*Stockings*) to a discussion with himself on what a war story should really be (*How to Tell a True War Story*). Another possible reason for this non-linear timeline in *The Things They Carried* might be to offer a unique perspective for readers of the book -- there are very few stories with this disjointed structure, so perhaps O’Brien was hoping that readers would gain some insights from other stories.

O’Brien uses vernacular within stories to great effect as well. Many of his vignettes are nested stories, with O’Brien simply recording what someone else is saying, while adding some of his own embellishments. An example is *Speaking of Courage* -- in the preceding story, *Notes,* O’Brien mentions that “[Norman Bowker] did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part was my own.” O’Brien mentions later that soldiers attempted to make light of death to make it less terrifying to them -- they can make death so distant that they can overcome it. In this way, O’Brien writes stories to overcome death, adding details here and there to keep the dead alive. An example of this thinking is seen in *The Lives of the Dead* -- O’Brien transitions from greeting a dead body in Vietnam to reflecting on how when he was young, he became obsessed with falling asleep, because then he could somehow “resurrect” his first love, Linda, (died of a brain tumor) in his dreams. He mentions that he and Linda had conversations and went to places together, like ice skating. O’Brien became quickly obsessed with this dream-world, even going to sleep earlier and earlier just so he could talk with Linda -- make up stories about where they went, what they talked about, and what they did. The best example of this mindset is seen in the middle of this story -- when Curt Lemon dies stepping on a Vietnamese bomb, the soldiers invent stories to “keep the dead alive”(114). Over time, they built up one anecdote with many layers of detail -- how on Halloween, Curt Lemon went out trick-or-treating, naked, in a Vietnamese village. Each soldier told the story differently, adding different levels of detail (read: more swear words and repetition of the event). O’Brien also uses this technique in other stories, albeit in a different way. In *How to Tell a True War Story*, O’Brien describes Curt Lemon’s death, but not in the way a reader would expect -- he does not mention that blood and carnage caused by stepping on a live grenade, but tries to paint Lemon’s death as a beautiful event. He says, “the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree”(41) -- a “love story”, as O’Brien put it. This detachment from death, the feigned (or unfeigned -- nobody knows but the author) ignorance of the blood and carnage helps O’Brien cope with the horrors of the war.

However, O’Brien refutes this claim -- at least from a first impression -- in *How to Tell a True War Story*. O’Brien initially downplays the value of a war story, saying that a true war story “does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done.” (33). However, he soon contradicts himself with an example story, that describes the hallucinations of a platoon of men stationed in the mountains who hear sounds of a cocktail party and chamber orchestra and opera. This is another nested story, with O’Brien recording what Mitchell Sanders says to him. The story, however, isn’t the important part -- the observations that O’Brien makes of Sanders is the more essential element of the story. O’Brien notes the quiet desperation with which Sanders tells his story, saying that “I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustrations at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth.” (37). O’Brien’s argument is that the actual content of the story doesn’t matter -- it’s the process of telling it over and over again, adding and subtracting details to make it more than the truth, that makes a war story what it is. A contradictory statement -- the actual content of the story doesn’t make up the story, but the process of telling it does. Therefore, the coping mechanism that O’Brien uses and describes is the **process** of telling it over and over again and adding something new every time -- not the content itself. This process of telling narratives to cope with grief has been highlighted for its usefulness in numerous publications, and for good reason.

In conclusion, O’Brien uses fragmented transitions both between and in his stories as well as euphemisms to replace blood and death to convince readers that humanity that can use storytelling as a way to heal from events.

**WC: 1191**

Works Cited

O’Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*. 1st Mariner Books ed, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

Mohammed, Farah. “How Storytelling Heals.” *JSTOR Daily*, 3 Aug. 2018,     https://daily.jstor.org/how-storytelling-heals/.