The Soldierly Code: War Trauma and Coping in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Abstract

Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried *is sometimes portrayed as a work about soldiers that shows the brotherhood created in war and the ways soldiers struggle once they heroically return from a warzone; however, through a postmodernist narrative framework, the episodic novel becomes not a glorification of war but a denigration of it. O'Brien's work is steeped in the negatives that come from war and shows how those negatives impact the lives of soldiers both during and following their time in combat. Further, O'Brien's novel takes the romanticized notions of war and gives them an upside-down quality to illustrate how patriotism can create isolation, the concept of duty can create murder, and following orders can make it impossible to cope with the things soldiers do in the name of survival. Because the novel is fundamentally grounded in the soldier's experience, reading O'Brien's work as a glorification of the soldier is easy, but by reading it as a denigration of the soldierly code, which privileges silence and duty over personal health and well-being, the novel expands into a search for methods of coping with trauma and perpetrator's guilt. The postmodernist view then cements each of "the things they carried" as a thing that has removed O'Brien's soldiers from their humanity and community. Through this understanding, this paper seeks to describe the impact of the soldierly code of silence, isolation, and duty and the way each act to dehumanize O'Brien's soldiers.*

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> *"The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma."*
>
> *Judith Lewis Herman*

Introduction

The effects of war on the psyche present several obstacles for the mental and emotional health of soldiers, and these are the very areas in which Tim O'Brien[1] takes his audience in his fact-based fictive work, *The Things They Carried*. As each character is reduced to something like a shadow self, O'Brien forces the narrative's perspective on the ways his characters are dealing with the war by stripping away any romantic notion the soldier "hero" once carried. Instead, O'Brien focuses on the soldier not as a hero or idol but as a human who, because of war, is damaged irreparably, and his focus lies not in one aspect of war but in the entirety of it—deployment and return. By focusing his work on the entirety of the individual—body and mind—and the whole of war, O'Brien can delve deeper into the traumas of war and uncover the tangled knot that renders those traumas inseparable. For O'Brien's soldiers, the effects of war are present in the ways they attempt to communicate both in the midst of and after returning from the warzone in their inability to communicate meaningfully during verbal exchanges. The inability of so many characters to communicate, however, highlights an important aspect of postmodern literature: how to communicate when there is no objective truth. What O'Brien shows is that through a certain amount of psychological resilience[2] and a dependency on the aspect of silence as a part of speech as well as living with perpetrator's trauma[3], a true soldier does not celebrate the war from which he or she has returned—war is not beautiful—nor does a true soldier live freely once he or she has reemerged from earthly hell only to live in isolation as a means of coping—survival is just another thing they carry.

Illusory Living and Survival

O'Brien's work offers a great deal to the field of trauma and the soldier because he refuses to color the experiences of war in anything but honesty, regardless of

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[1] Both author and character are named Tim O'Brien; however, because they seem inextricably linked even if the novel is coined as a fictive work, I will refer to both by the same name without quotation marks of differentiation between the two. If attention needs to be drawn to one or the other, it will be marked within the essay.

[2] Psychological resilience for the purposes of this paper refers only to the bounce back mechanism which is inherent within an individuals to cope in a social environment for which they are disadvantaged.

[3] According to research conducted by the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale, perpetrator trauma is "The pain associated with damage to one's moral identity as the result of having committed an act of violence" which is the working definition used for this paper. Although perpetrator's trauma can be attributed to any act of violence, here it will be attributed only to soldiers.

his fictional medium. Despite Alex Vernon's[4] argument that O'Brien's episodic novel is allegorical to the resurrection of Christ and exemplifies salvation through storytelling, this argument narrows the reading and ignores exactly what both author and characters are telling the audience—war does not bring salvation, nor can a person rise from the ashes of what was. Despite the seemingly hopeful ending, according to O'Brien, in storytelling, "there is the illusion of aliveness" (O'Brien 230). The word "illusion" here is important as it shows that storytelling is only an escape from a reality that cannot be in the same way as Ted Lavender's tranquilizers created a reality that did not exist. The stories show the mental, emotional, and psychological struggle of soldiers who had to forget living for the sake of surviving, and despite the men's best efforts, they are only surviving in the world. For the soldiers, truth remains only in the form of memory. For O'Brien's soldiers, the dope and booze represent the men's preference "to bury their own memories in silence or conceal what, in psychiatric terms, would be called their post-traumatic stress disorder," because memories hold only more pain and existing but not living (Eyerman et al. 32-33). In the lie, however, there is something of a brief reprieve that allows the characters to move outside of the pain of the war. Hope, therefore, is overshadowed by the overwhelming sense of loss that the surviving soldiers must carry with them and that constantly reminds them of the "twenty-seven bodies altogether, and parts of several others. The dead were everywhere. Some lay in piles. Some lay alone" (O'Brien 242).

When the soldiers return home, they do not then return to a world which is made better, as Christ's death and resurrection did, but to a world of which they are no longer a part. Furthermore, the men must return to a world that is ignorant of the realities of war and to a world that does not and cannot understand their newly learned reality of death and survival, which follows them back from Vietnam.

Unlike the soldier heroes of earlier literature, like Odysseus or Achilles, O'Brien's modern soldiers in *The Things They Carried* are purposefully and poignantly average. The men are not trekking over rolling scenic landscapes as they fight for love and country, because war does not necessitate love. Instead, Jimmy Cross and Alpha Company dig into "the darkness" and look onto "the sullen paddies" that surrounded them (O'Brien 11-12). Despite the dangers that surround the men, none of them at first are disillusioned to war. Instead, they are preoccupied with the lives they left behind when they left to fight in Vietnam and are exemplified in the items each man carries with him in his rucksack. The tokens of home are meant to act as an anchor for the soldiers; however, the items act only

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[4] In his article, "Storytelling, Salvations, and Pilgrimage in Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried,'" Alex Vernon asserts that O'Brien's story is about finding salvation through storytelling and that the novel suggests a Christlike allegory which begins with the trek to the cross, the death, and the resurrection.

to isolate the soldiers further.

Each of the soldiers uses their personal effects to temporarily escape the Vietnam jungle; however, this escapist mentality contributes to the inability of each member to communicate or connect with another member of the unit, which is detrimental to the individual psyche. Each member attempts to grasp the world that he left behind. Despite the military's insistence that "families and friends should be encouraged to write letters to loved ones, even if they do not receive replies" in an effort to maintain troop morale, there is no such insistence for soldiers to write home (Ursano et al. 10). Soldiers are expected to shoulder "a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility" but to maintain momentum by thinking of those things that they protect (O'Brien 15). For Jimmy Cross, Martha is the only thing present. Although O'Brien makes the preoccupation of love important to the story for Jimmy Cross in the titular episode, this preoccupation is seen both as a weakness and a failure in his character, ultimately leading to the death of one of his soldiers, Ted Lavender. In his mind, before Lavender's death, Jimmy's imaginary world of love is founded on a mixture of silence and a psychological resilience that has sheltered him from the realities of war. With the loss of the security and safety of that fantasy world following the death of his soldier, Jimmy Cross is transformed from a friend of the soldiers into the man leading the soldiers who "would accept the blame for what happened" (25).

The love between Mark Fossie and Mary Anne is shown similarly—as a destructive rather than a positive force. As Mary Anne joins her fiancée in the jungle, she transforms from a "pretty young girl" into something "utterly flat and indifferent" (O'Brien 110). Unlike the relationship of Jimmy Cross and the invisible Martha, Mary Anne is real and only fades into nothingness when she unsuccessfully attempts to transition into a world in which she does not belong. Further, as Mary Anne struggles to connect to the soldiers of Alpha Company and to the Greenies, her psychological resilience takes over as social constructs fall away, and results in a survival tactic that creates further isolation for both the soldiers of Alpha Company and herself. O'Brien shows this isolation and silence as "dangerous […] ready for the kill" (116). Like Mary Anne, the soldiers are forced further into isolation and further from the social constructs which initiate a survival mechanism within the mind and the necessity to use non-verbal communication in an attempt to connect and communicate.

By stripping away the social constructs that surround a soldier during and after returning from the war, *The Things They Carried* suggests something of the way those constructs are part of that which reduces meaningful connection and communication to a rigid, militaristic standard. As O'Brien shows, the soldiers are unable to process the

world that surrounds them. The two primary examples of what should be true relation-ships are devolved into memory and myth rather than something that is substantial and active. These moments are the very same in which O'Brien highlights the necessity of psychological resilience to cope with the changes of their reality as well as the silence and isolation imposed on the men during wartime. In an interview O'Brien gave to Larry McCaffrey, O'Brien admits that "most people fighting there—the ordinary grunts like me—didn't think much about issues of good and evil. These things simply didn't cross their minds most of the time. Instead, inevitably, their attention was on the mosquitoes and bugs and horrors and pains and fears" (134). Ironically, the same social constructs that were altered for survival during wartime are the ones that tell the men to be silent and bear the pain and trauma of war. Men especially are expected to behave like men, strong and sure, and soldiers are expected to defend their country and its identity. In this way, "the period of silence, exclusion, and oblivion, is not only a period of being 'on hold'; such prevention of more public narrations may become part of a more social trauma itself" (Eyerman et al. xix).

Despite the negative connotations associated with the words silence and isola-tion, silence must be understood not as something in opposition to speech but as part of speech (Gere 206). The novel presents the reader with seemingly stock dialogue—a trait that is taught to members of the military in order to main classification and confiden-tiality for a mission objective. Isolation becomes a way of life, and silence, or non-verbal communication, becomes the only language in which a soldier is fluent. The nods and gestures the men use throughout the text in order to communicate connect them to a community despite the fact they are entirely alone in their individual pain. Similarly, the isolation and silence act as a means for the men to protect themselves from the "allegiance to obscenity and evil" (O'Brien 69). By adhering to the code of silence and isolation and by understanding silence as a part of speech, the members of Alpha Company are thus able "to eliminate the 'truth' of speech and the 'lie' of silence" (Gere 207). Similarly, the lack of necessity tied to speech and the importance placed on isolation allows the men the opportunity to maintain their identity throughout the experience.

The Psychology of the Soldier

The novel also does not shy away from the psychological resilience of his characters once they return from battle; however, rather than saving this important aspect of soldier survival for the end of the novel, O'Brien gives his audience the first true encounter with that resilience in the second episode of the novel, "Love," ensuring that its power strikes with absolute potency and urgency. As Jimmy Cross and Tim O'Brien, the character, sit staring at "a hundred old photographs" and "neither of [them] could think of much to

say," both characters uncomfortably display their uncertainty of how to proceed in social situations. Both men similarly portray the disconnectedness from the world where their shared military experience has excluded them. Although the men try to forget the days of their time in Vietnam, "atrocities […] refuse to be buried" (Herman 1). Despite both men's desire to move beyond what happened, it sits at the forefront of their silence and in all the things which neither of them says. Their agreement, "not to mention anything about—" war and the deaths of the men, shows their psychological resilience to acknowledge the horrors of war while being disadvantaged on how to discuss those horrors.

This idea of psychological resilience, though present in each of the stories within the novel, is similarly powerful in a later episode, "Field Trip," in which Tim O'Brien, the character, returns to the field where Kiowa was killed. Although O'Brien is with his daughter at the time, his mental and emotional isolation within the story suggests a kind of dissociative moment in which internally rather than external fragmentations of his time as a soldier come back. While his daughter begs to leave, O'Brien loses himself in the past as he tells her to "stay put" while he swims in a marsh searching for the areas where Kiowa had been (O'Brien 186). In O'Brien's traumatized memory from his time in Vietnam, he searches not just for what was but a way to unmake the present in which he lives. By revisiting the site of Kiowa's death, he shows a wavering psychological resilience that allows him at once to function—a strong resilience—within his present reality but lose himself in his past—a faltering resilience.

Through the protagonist, O'Brien shows that the effects of war trauma on an individual can vary; however, one of the markers that the individual is coping and progressing toward strong mental health is the very resilience mechanic is one in which the novel seems deeply interested. Although the two stories mentioned above show much stronger markers of this resilience, the novel itself acts as a testament to the psychological state of the characters. Just as there is an illusion of aliveness, the fragmented and disordered presentation of the episodes presents an illusion of mental stability. What O'Brien gives the audience is an incomplete photo because it "is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and personally what one has seen" (Herman 2). These are the very struggles with which O'Brien appears to fight; however, the mark of the work's overall psychological resilience to the effects of war is that he "had something to say: [he] had witnessed things, smelled things, imagined things which struck [him] as startling and terrifying and intriguing in all sorts of ways," and he shared them (McCaffrey 131). Rather than shrink into hopelessness and despair and rather than remain a silent soldier,

O'Brien's work tackles those very traumas, real or imagined, which continue to plague soldiers following a war.

Wartime Guilt and Perpetrator's Trauma

Although perhaps most prominent, psychological resilience and silence are not the only major traumatic elements that the novel examines. One of the more difficult traumas comes in the form of perpetrator's guilt. Most research into war trauma or violent, traumatic experiences seeks to understand the victim's trauma and experience; however, in "The Man I Killed," O'Brien tries to understand the trauma felt by the perpetrator of the violence. Despite the conversation between the men, the voice of O'Brien is not heard physically. Instead, O'Brien's feelings come through in the account of the details of the dead man. O'Brien imagines an entire life for the man and holds those ideas close to him (O'Brien 128). Because a soldier should compartmentalize the deaths of casualties of war and of "tangos,"[5] the introspection of O'Brien's character is moving as it shows that no amount of military training can prepare a person for the outcome of skirmish. Further, O'Brien's internalized feelings demonstrate his guilt in taking the life of another human.

O'Brien also portrays perpetrator's guilt in the character of Mary Anne as a bastardized reflection of his own experience. Returning to the episode "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Mary Anne's perpetrator trauma synthesizes in what can only be described as a mental break in which hung "at the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues" (O'Brien 110). Rather than attempt to humanize her victims, Mary Anne equates them to objects that can be bought and sold. She retreats farther into isolation and farther from her own humanity as a means of escaping the trauma that comes with taking a life. Rather than feel remorse, Mary Anne's reveling in the atrocities she commits should not be seen as a true enjoyment of the acts she has committed but as a phsycohological reactionary response to those acts she has committed. The primary difference that separates Mary Anne from Tim O'Brien and the other men is a lack of military training and preparation for the atrocities of war on her part. This key difference enables Mary Anne's trauma to break through her limited psychological resilience in war to distort and dehumanize her and her actions.

The perpetrator's trauma O'Brien highlights is not simply for the actions that the men have committed but also embodies the inactions of the men. Jimmy Cross, whose failures as a leader culminate in the death of Ted Lavender, exemplifies perpetrator's trauma, and the trauma acts as a transformative catalyst which propels him and the men to return to the military norm (O'Brien 24-26). Although O'Brien uses the idea of perpetrator trauma sparingly, its effects are no less evident in the impact it has on the

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[5] A general term for targets used by the United States Armed Forces.

different characters throughout the text. Perpetrator trauma, like silence and isolation, should not be viewed as a negative reaction to one's actions but instead as a transformative reaction to one's own actions. O'Brien's displays of varied reactions show a lack of objectively true results for dealing with the atrocities a person commits and suggests that each individual experience will ultimately reflect the level of psychological resilience a person has and the level of isolation to which a person has been subjected, voluntarily or otherwise. Through the reactions, a person—in this case, a soldier—will either reconnect to humanity or reconnect to one's animal nature. Neither, however, is wrong.

The final piece of O'Brien's coping puzzle comes in the form of isolation. Although the idea of isolation is tied to each of the other ideas, silence, psychological resilience, and perpetrator's trauma, it should be explored as an entity of its own. Isolation in O'Brien's episodic novel is evident throughout. Through isolation, the men are viewed not as a whole, nor as a a unit, but as individuals. The description of the items the men physically carry with them into the jungles of Vietnam suggests something of the individuality that the military struggles to banish (O'Brien 14). As O'Brien shifts the frame of his narrative from an organized military unit to that of an individual with only the purpose of survival, the isolation of the men becomes the central focus of the work and the basis of his search for truth within his own experience.

The episode "How to Tell a True War Story," which details O'Brien's attempt at connecting with another through the understanding of an experience, describes the necessity of isolation both in the guise of objective truth and in the reality of subjective truth. Through a search of "what happened from what seemed to happen," O'Brien seems to describe himself not as a narrator but as an observer of his own life (71). Because of influences of the mind, O'Brien is ultimately isolated even from his own experiences and must rely on his understanding of those experiences in an attempt to form meaningful connections with his present reality. Further, O'Brien is unable to translate his understanding of his experience to those who have not been trained in a militaristic sense, because "[they weren't] listening" (85). There is an impossibility for soldiers, which is created through training, to describe in concrete terms the events and effects of life in a wartime situation. What O'Brien shows is that it is not only a lack of understanding in interpreting those events but also in communicating the experiencer's truth. In isolation, there is no "final and definitive truth" (76). Isolation is an "inescapable experience," which separates all people (Chen 80). Despite the author and the character's best intentions, truth is lost in both telling and understanding, and isolation is all that can remain from such an exchange.

Conclusion

The power of O'Brien's narrative to move the reader is undeniably rich, but to read *The Things They Carried* outside of the context of the postmodernist framework is to miss the arguments O'Brien brings about speech, isolation, trauma, resilience, and truth. O'Brien's text is rich with trauma theory, but it is the ways in which the different aspects of trauma and coping combine to reduce the ability to form an objective truth on these abstracts that move the text outside of the space of allegorical representations and into a space of searching and understanding. The novel's preoccupation with the intersection of these elements, which alter the ways in which the soldiers communicate and connect to the world, highlights one aspect which the postmodernist movement strives to illuminate—redefining reality in the absence of objective truth. Although O'Brien shows the soldiers as a part of a community, the military and the unit, they are separated by individual experiences and reactions to those experiences. Because of the postmodern framework and his search for truth, O'Brien is able to draw conclusions about his time in Vietnam. Those conclusions serve not only as an attempt to communicate with the rest of the world his truth but also as a means of understanding and coping with his personal reality. O'Brien's understanding appears to suggest that coping is inextricably tied to finding meaning in isolation, silence, psychological resilience, the trauma one experiences from his or her own actions, and individual truth.

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