

# THE DE-TOTALIZATION OF HISTORY IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED* (1990)

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Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased,  
*when there is nothing to remember, except the story*  
Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

## **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; Vietnam War; truth; fiction; Postmodernism.

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,

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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 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 this point, there is the insertion of parts of the

letter in the narrative to give verisimilitude to the text, but at the same time, this shows the readers that these are only discourses, which are open for reinterpretations. 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.

He could not see himself performing actions such as "charging an enemy position, taking aim at another human being" (p.44). The idea of killing a person who is your enemy only according to official reports, is not the kind of action that made him feel like a hero of his country.

O'Brien gives an account of the day in the ambush site when he threw the grenade at the feet of "a short, slender man of about twenty" (p.131), who was killed. The narrator creates a story for the dead man, describing him as someone who "was not a fighter" and "hoped that the Americans would go away. Soon, he hoped" (p.125). In reality, these were O'Brien's wishes transferred to that man. When his daughter Kathleen asked him if he had killed anyone, he said "Of course not"

(p.130), but even though the war was over he had not sorted it out yet (p.134). He “did not see the man as the enemy” (p.132). He remembers the grenade, the moments when “the young man dropped his weapon and began to run” (p.133), and Kiowa trying to convince him that it was the right thing to do, after all that “was a war” (p.133). However, “The words seemed far too complicated,” (p.134) and were not sufficient to make him change his mind. The narrator states that “Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don’t” (p.134). He still thinks of the man, walking toward him, and, in O’Brien’s thoughts, the man would pass away from the narrator, smile and “then continue up the trail to where it bends into the fog” (p.134). He would disappear the same way he had came into sight as “part of the morning fog,” or of O’Brien’s “own imagination” (p.132).

One of the strongest issues in the narrative is the interplay between truth and fiction. Later in the book, the narrator states that

[...] I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. [...]  
 But listen. Even *that* story is made up.  
 I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. (p.179).

O’Brien explains the two notions: the “happening-truth” is that he was a soldier and there were bodies; the “story-truth” is that here was a dead soldier and he had killed the man. He adds that stories “can make things present” (p.180). O’Brien needs to tell stories in order to make himself feel as if he were in the battlefield again. And he can say to his daughter “honestly” that he had killed or had not killed anyone (p.180), that is, it does not matter whether he had actually caused the death of that specific man, but since American soldiers were responsible for the deaths of many people in Vietnam, and he was there, he feels guilty too. His presence in Vietnam was enough. Hence, not only his



action is on focus, but also the complete involvement of U.S. troops in that war, which left sad, immutable and unending consequences.

Friendship may have different meanings during a war. In the story "Friends," O'Brien describes the pact that Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk, who had learned "to trust each other" (p.65), had made. According to their agreement established in late August, if one of them had an incident and had to be in a wheelchair forever, the other would have to "find an end to it" (p.65). They signed a paper and had witnesses. In October, Strunk stepped on a mortar round and lost a leg. After he realized what had happened, he implored Jensen not to kill him, saying that his leg could be sewn back. Strunk made Jensen swear that he would not kill him. Later they "heard that Strunk had died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight" (p.66). This episode shows that although they had that pact, it would be hard for one to kill the other in any circumstances. Jensen was probably terrified at the thought that, in the future, Strunk could ask him to put an end to the suffering Strunk was going through. But would Jensen have the courage to kill his friend? Friendship, in this case, can lead to mixed feelings, which are difficult to be managed and understood.

Another death addressed by the narrator is Curt Lemon's in the story called "How to Tell a True War Story." Lemon died in a very stupid way, when he and Rat Kiley were goofing with smoke grenades. After Lemon's death, Rat, in an insane act, kills a "baby VC water buffalo" (p.78) and then cries. The text shows the inexplicable violence towards the baby buffalo, seen as a Vietcong (VC). The war had made the soldiers mentally ill. They did not know the difference between the good guys and the bad guys. In this story, there is a profound discussion related to the question of truth. The story begins with the statement "This is true" (p.67), it goes to "it's all exactly true" (p.70), then to "it is difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (p.71), "The truths are contradictory" (p.80), "Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true" (p.81). And finally, "None of it happened. *None*

of it" (p.85). But, anyway, it is necessary to tell stories, to understand what happened or even what could have happened.

In the story "The Lives of the Dead", he recalls the deaths of Linda, his childhood sweetheart, Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, the young man he might have killed. Linda was nine years old and died as a result of brain tumor. However, by telling a story, she can be close to him again and say "'Timmy, stop crying'" (p.236).

According to Maria Bonn:

In Vietnam, O'Brien tells us, "we kept the dead alive with stories" (207). "The Lives of the Dead," the novel's final story contains O'Brien most definitive articulation of the relationship between memory and story. O'Brien recalls the death of his childhood sweetheart and how night after night he would invent dreams to bring her back. (1994, p.14)

The narrator addresses "the worst day of the war," which was the occasion when O'Brien and Mitchell Sanders had to carry the heavy bodies of some enemy soldiers who were killed in action (KIA) and toss them into a truck. After some time, Sanders sums up his thoughts towards the whole situation, by saying that "Death sucks" (p.243).

Writing/telling stories is the way the author found to bring back the past. He can see and listen to his friends again. Rodrigo Paula points out that O'Brien successfully uses his stories not only "to reevaluate the post-war impact on American youth" (2007, p.7), as shown through Norman's situation, but also to "immortalize those who had died" [...] and "keep the past alive and open so that people can rethink it" (p.8 - my translation). Thus, he can have a significant reason for his life and become free from that undefined, nebulous past, since he is trying to make it present and find answers to questions that still need to be clarified.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his book *The Age of Extremes* (1994), states that

The Vietnam War demoralized and divided the nation [the U.S.A.], amid televised scenes of riots and anti-war demonstrations; destroyed an American president; led to a universally predicted defeat and retreat after ten years (1965-75); and, what was even more to the point, demonstrated the isolation of the U.S.A. For not a single one of America's European allies sent even nominal contingents of troops to fight alongside the U.S. forces. Why the U.S. came to embroil itself in a doomed war, against which both its allied, neutrals, and even the U.S.S.R. had warned it, is almost impossible to understand, except as part of that dense cloud of incomprehension, confusion and paranoia through which the main actors in the Cold War tapped their way. (1996, p.244-245).

It is possible to conclude that whether O'Brien's stories are true or not is not the central issue. O'Brien, in his work of fiction, aims at showing several possibilities to de-totalize "total History". The remarkable aspect of his writing is to show that "Stories are for joining the past to the future" (p.38) and when remembering leads to a story, it will last forever. The author proves the power of literature to construct and reconstruct the historical past.

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