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"Bell-Shaped Flowers and Butterflies"

Metaphor and Metafiction in Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War Stories

The Things They Carried

B.A. Essay

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May 2012

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
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Summary

Based on his experiences during the Vietnam War Tim O'Brien wrote a collection of short stories, later published collectively in 1990 under the name *The Things They Carried*, in which he describes his and his company's time and experience during their deployment in Vietnam. But what might be, at first glance, seen as an autobiographical war story is so much more than just that. Through the use of metaphors, symbols, allegory and metafiction O'Brien manages to add a certain depth to the story. While it seems to be an autobiography, it is not, as O'Brien points out in the book numerous times that it is fiction, as well in the complete title of the book *The Things They Carried – a Work of Fiction* by Tim O'Brien.

O'Brien chooses to use figurative language, especially metaphors and symbols, to describe and depict some of the main elements in the book, the USA, Vietnam, the Vietnam War and of course the members of the Alpha Company. An allegory of pilgrimage is also one of the issues seen in the book. Both the Alpha Company and Tim O'Brien in one way or another go on a pilgrimage. While the Alpha Company's pilgrimage is more physical, O'Brien's is more spiritual and emotional as his pilgrimage is taken on in writing the story. Another element of the book is its metafictional quality and the question of truth and fiction. Even though the book is somewhat structured as an autobiography, O'Brien leaves us often wondering as to whether the stories are real or made-up, and one comes to the conclusion that fiction can sometimes indeed be "more truthful" than fact.

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Introduction

Tim O'Brien's book, a collection of short stories from 1990, *The Things They Carried*, about Alpha Company's time during the Vietnam War might at first glance be seen as an autobiographical war story but the story has more facets than first expected. O'Brien makes extensive use of various literary techniques in *The Things They Carried*. In this essay I will focus on and discuss these literary techniques.

Throughout *The Things They Carried* O'Brien uses metaphors and symbols in describing and depicting the Vietnam War, the USA and Vietnam, as well as the members of the Alpha Company.

Allegory is another literary technique O'Brien uses in *The Things They Carried*, namely the allegory of a pilgrimage. Not only do Alpha Company and its leader take on a spiritual and emotional journey during their deployment, but the author, Tim O'Brien takes on a spiritual pilgrimage in writing the stories. The similarities between O'Brien's time during the war as well as his post-war experience, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* will be discussed.

The last thing I will discuss in this essay is the book's metafictional quality. Metafiction draws attention to the relationship between truth and fiction, which is a topic O'Brien discusses several times in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien tells the reader a story, only to recant them somewhat later in the book, only to retell them yet again adding details while omitting others. Thus he leaves the reader more than once in a certain state of uncertainty.

The Vietnam War and *The Things They Carried*

Tim O'Brien makes extensive use of many different literary techniques in *The Things They Carried*, especially metaphors and symbols in describing the war in Vietnam. War is hell, war is rain, and war is a cocktail party, are many of the ways in which Tim O'Brien describes the Vietnam War. The soldiers are not only fighting the Vietnamese but they also have to deal with the weather conditions and the unknown surroundings;

“The rain was the war and you had to fight it” (O’Brien, 163). As might be expected, O’Brien gives us a picture of hellish and harsh conditions in Vietnam: “War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling, war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead” (O’Brien, 80). What is interesting here is that Tim O’Brien uses both negative and positive words to describe the war. Not only is the war something terrible that can “make you dead”, but it is also an adventure, thrilling and fun. It is a cocktail party that the US army is gate-crashing and it is also a banquet for the bugs, chewing tunnels through the soldiers flesh just like the Vietcong were digging tunnels through Vietnam.

O’Brien prefers to refer to the enemy as ghosts. This word demonstrates the fact that the Vietnamese army and the Vietcong were not easy to spot and that they usually came out and killed during the night. During the night the soldiers themselves must be as invisible as possible. An example of how things can go wrong is when Kiowa on the spur of the moment turns on a flashlight for a few seconds which results in his death; “We called the enemy ghosts. ‘Bad night,’ we’d say, ‘the ghosts are out’” (O’Brien, 202). The whole ghostly atmosphere is made even more prominent with O’Brien describing the country as spooky with shadows and tunnels in the dark, indicating that Vietnam was haunted. During the night the “ghosts” dance and shimmer in the pagodas. The main ghost, Charlie Cong is actually the whole Vietcong. Charlie Cong becomes supernatural, “[a]lmost magical – appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary” (O’Brien, 202). Here O’Brien emphasizes the fact that the US soldiers were scared of the enemy, and that the US army, despite their expected advantage, was put in place by the Vietnamese. Even the sound of the war is ghostly. Vietnam is loud even when quiet. Soldiers hear voices and chitchat as if they were in a cocktail party; “They hear the actual martini glasses. Real hoity-toity, all very civilized, except this isn’t civilization. This is Nam” (O’Brien, 74). But the voices they hear are not human; it is the country talking; the mountains, the rocks, the trees and even the animals all seems to be talking. Even though the soldiers try to turn everything

off, afterwards they still hear things, not the voices this time, but the stillness that is just as loud.

The baby “VC” water buffalo that the Alpha Company encounters and take with them into a village could be seen as a symbol of the war. Even though the buffalo is merely a baby it does not show any signs of emotion or interest when getting offered food or when getting shot; “He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again...” (O’Brien, 79). No matter what part of it gets shot off, the baby buffalo always gets back on its feet until it is finally killed off. The baby buffalo symbolizes the opponents in the war as they see them, never giving up, never showing any form of emotion.

Another symbol of the war is the “shit” field that Kiowa disappears into after being shot. Just as the shit field swallowed Kiowa, the war swallowed the soldiers. Not only does the war swallow soldiers but just as much the American pride and decency, as demonstrated by the fact that Kiowa had been the most decent guy among the group. They will return from the war a little less proud of being American.

Many Faces of the USA

In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” we encounter a girl named Mary Ann Bell. Mary Ann Bell is a girlfriend of one of the US soldiers stationed in Vietnam, though not a part of Alpha Company. The soldier, missing her so much, arranges for her to be flown in from the USA, indicating that nothing, no matter how ridiculous, is impossible for the Americans. Mary Ann is an All-American girl, blonde, only seventeen and fresh out of high school. She oozes innocence and is truly a symbol of America: “She had long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too” (O’Brien, 93). Here the American colors are used to give us a hint of the connection between her and the United States of America; blue, red and white, just like in the American flag, and she is friendly, like Americans would like the world to see them.

She is, however, as it later turns out, not at all what she seems to be. Even though depicted as an innocent naive girl, she is very curious about the war as such. She shows interest in her surroundings, is eager to learn and gets to know Vietnam and the Vietnamese way of living. She is, as O'Brien puts it, "a cheerleader in the opposite team's locker room", like she is trying to gather some information that she can use later on, she is eager to meet the enemy and find their weaknesses. It does not take long for her to adapt to the situation and she is soon involved in the war. Being a quick learner she helps out in the medic tent, demonstrating that she is not afraid of challenges; she gets her hands dirty and digs into wounds. Gradually she stops being concerned about her appearance; her fingernails get chipped and she stops wearing make-up. She is now at war and her looks do not matter anymore, just like USA being at war and the world's opinion does not matter so much anymore.

Just as Mary Ann Bell loses her innocence and discovers her new strength she also gains an increased authority in her new surroundings. She gradually gets more and more involved in the war and starts to socialize with the special forces of the US army, the Green Berets. Along with her change in personality, her appearance changes as well, gone are the nails, make-up and hair-do, and even the pink sweater and white culottes. She now wears military uniform and carries weapons; "She wore a bush hat and filthy green fatigues; she carried the standard M-16 automatic assault rifle; her face was black with charcoal" (O'Brien, 102). At the same time she becomes more and more distant from her boyfriend and the dream of their future life together with house and three kids.

An attempt is made by her boyfriend to "tame" her, but she is, however, not at all happy about being in a "safe" place. She wants nothing more than being a part of the war and being excluded from it makes her uneasy. Despite the efforts of "taming" her, she soon goes off again with the greenies, being away for several weeks. Upon returning the soldiers see that even though she is there physically she has not returned mentally. Her otherwise innocent blue eyes turned "jungle green" indicating that she is totally caught up in the war. Upon entering her room it becomes clear to the soldiers that she has indeed become part of the war. Her room is filled with smells from Vietnam, not only the nice smell of incense but also the smell of Vietnam at war, the smell of kill and decaying animals, with animal skins and bones scattered around her

room. Even though she is now a “greenie”, she occasionally wears her pink sweater and white culottes, but instead of looking like the innocent All-American girl, she now looks even scarier, having added a necklace of tongues to her outfit; “But the grotesque part, he said, was her jewelry. At the girl’s throat was a necklace of human tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable” (O’Brien, 110-111).

Tim O’Brien implies that Mary Ann Bell has gone insane; the USA has gone insane in this war. She is totally caught up in the war, and she becomes threatening and scary, even to her fellow greenies. It is like the only thing she can think about is the war, she wants to eat Vietnam; “I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it there inside me” (O’Brien, 111). As with the USA, there was no hope for Mary Ann Bell that she would leave the Vietnam War easily and without an immense fight; “She had crossed to the other side. She was a part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (O’Brien, 116).

While Mary Ann Bell is the truest symbol of the USA, at least when it comes the Vietnam War, both Henry Dobbins and Kiowa can also be seen as symbols of the United States, but this time as the USA would like the rest of the world to see them. The big Henry Dobbins, the gentle giant, symbolizes the good America, the one with the good intentions:

He was like America itself, big and strong, full of good intentions, a roll of fat jiggling at his belly, slow of foot but always plodding along, always there when you needed him, a believer in the virtues of simplicity and directness and hard labor. Like his country, too, Dobbins was drawn toward sentimentality.
(O’Brien, 117)

This is just like America would like to be and be seen; Henry Dobbins is invulnerable, he is never wounded. More importantly he finishes the war without even ever getting a

scratch. This is how the USA wants to be seen in the eyes of the rest of the world, nothing can ever hurt it.

Kiowa can also be seen as a symbol of America – the old America, adapting to the new, but still holding on to the traditions of its people. He has become a Christian, like most of the Native Americans, adapting to the western way of living. Despite this he is still in touch with his roots, carries with him the distrust of the white man and feathered hatchet that used to belong to his grandfather. Kiowa is the only soldier in Alpha Company that truly shows signs of compassion; he is the one that covers up the Vietnamese soldier that Tim killed, instead of just leaving him lying there. He is also the one who listens to the others, comforts them and encourages them. Kiowa is the decent USA; “In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency” (O’Brien, 81). But the American decency does not fare well in the war as the decent Kiowa ends up dead in a “shit” field.

Peace-loving Vietnam?

Just as O’Brien describes the USA with personified symbols, he also chooses to do the same when describing Vietnam, thus personifying both nations. In “The Man I Killed” chapter, Tim O’Brien tells his daughter about the only man he killed, or admits to having killed, during the war. While the biggest and most striking symbol for the United States of America is a sweet All-American girl, who turned savage during the war, the most prominent symbol for Vietnam is the man O’Brien killed. The dead Vietnamese is described as being a feminine man who loved mathematics and school and wanted nothing more than to teach mathematics, marry his sweetheart and write poems. He also did not care for the war. The fact that he wanted to dig himself into a hole, lying motionless until the war is over, indicates that the majority of the Vietnamese people perhaps did not want to go to war, but were to some extent forced to, somewhat reluctantly, so they would not be a disgrace to their families. As mentioned before, the man O’Brien killed, liked books and mathematics, indicating that this was not an equal fight – the soldier would rather like to study and live a simple, peaceful life, rather than being a soldier. He did not even pick a fight while at school, even though he got teased,

indicating Vietnam as being a peaceful nation. He only wanted the Americans to return home so he could continue with his life.

His physical wounds could symbolize the condition of Vietnam at some point in the war. With his face and teeth totally destroyed, he has become an enemy that has lost his face and has no teeth; the enemy has been neutralized and somewhat ridiculed. The star-shaped hole in the place of his one eye could signal the “calling card” from USA, the star symbolizing the Stars and Stripes.

The reason the man is being described as feminine could be to symbolize the unequal fight. The masculine US soldier is the offender whereas the feminine and somewhat frail looking Vietnamese is the defender: “The skin on the right cheek was smooth and fine-grained and hairless” (O’Brien, 127). The Vietnamese soldier is bony and not very muscled indicating the lack of defensive capability (weapons). Even when he lies dead on the ground the surroundings are feminine so to speak, as the dead soldier lies next to small, blue bell-shaped flowers and butterflies are flying by. This is in stark contrast from rest of the description of the war. Vietnam might generally be a peace-loving nation that has gotten ugly because of the war.

When Tim O’Brien is somewhat sorry for having killed the Vietnamese soldier, one of the other soldiers has to remind him that he was one of the enemies, and not a “woman”: “Tim, it’s a war. The guy wasn’t Heidi – he had a weapon, right? It’s a tough thing, for sure...” (O’Brien, 126). The Vietnamese are also shown as living a simpler life than the Americans, being mostly farmers. Tim O’Brien also indicates here that not all Vietnamese soldiers were communists, but merely ordinary people longing for independence.

Jimmy Cross as Jesus Christ

One of the main characters in *The Things They Carried*, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, quite obviously symbolizes Jesus Christ. The most obvious clue lies in his name. Not only are his initials JC, like Jesus Christ, but also his surname, Cross, indicates strongly where O’Brien was heading with this character.

Being the lieutenant and therefore in charge of the group, Jimmy Cross carries, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, the responsibility of the lives of his men. Lt. Cross carries with him a strobe light, leading the men, the men keeping their eye on the light, just like Christian people keeping their faith and beliefs. When staying at the pagoda, the monks offer him their cane chair, a chair that the monks seem very proud of, placing it near the altar: “The old monk seemed proud of the chair, and proud that such man as Lieutenant Cross should be sitting in it” (O’Brien, 120). The chair is obviously not offered to everyone to sit in, but only to those the monks think are deserving of it.

At the beginning, Jimmy, having no military ambitions, spends his time daydreaming about his female friend Martha, who actually cannot be seen as his girlfriend, but more as his love interest. Jimmy and Martha have, as could be the case with Jesus and Martha, a platonic relationship, more like a friendship than anything else. There is the indication that there has never been any form of sexual encounter between the two of them and for Jimmy it is enough for him to have touched her knee. When one of his men dies, he gives up his love for Martha, or at least tries to put it on hold, burning her letters, thus sacrificing this relationship for the safety of his company, as he sees it as his responsibility to lead them through Vietnam and the war safely.

Just as we see Jimmy Cross as Jesus, we could be tempted to see the Alpha Company as his disciples, even though Lt. Cross was trained not to see them as individuals but as a group of soldiers. However, this proves a little difficult for him; “He preferred to view his men not as units but as human beings. And Kiowa had been a splendid human being, the very best, intelligent and gentle and quiet-spoken. Very brave, too. And decent” (O’Brien, 164).

Of all his disciples you could say that Kiowa was the most devoted. He carried the New Testament with him everywhere he went and was actually the one who showed the most Christian traits of them all. Another disciple is Henry Dobbins. He oozes kindness and wants nothing more than being nice to other people and be, like Kiowa, decent. When staying in the Pagoda with the monks in “Church”, the monks refers to him as “Soldier Jesus ... good soldier Jesus” (O’Brien, 120). Being a simple man Henry Dobbins does not wish to become a priest, even though the thought had occurred to him, as it includes sermons and masses, the brainy part of religion, according to him. He sees

himself as being too simple to explain things to people. Henry wishes to show and practice his Christianity by promoting the gentle side of his nature.

Carrying Burdens in Vietnam

The things that Alpha Company carry not only symbolize their function or rank in the troop, but also their emotions, personalities and heritage. Each of the soldiers carries the necessities they need in a war. On their feet they wear their jungle boots, they wear their standard outfit, they carry their weapons, and on their heads they wear their steel helmets. This in itself is a heavy load to carry but it is not what is weighing them down. In addition they carry an emotional burden which is much heavier than the physical.

What they carry also, to some extent, gives away their function and role in the unit; “What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly a field of specialty” (O’Brien, 5). First lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries a strobe light, thus leading the way and appropriate for this “Jesus” figure he probably carries the heaviest burden of them all, the responsibility of the lives of his men and when one of his men dies he also carries the guilt of his death. This guilt becomes even worse when he realizes that instead of thinking about the wellbeing of his company, he was daydreaming of Martha, his love interest. The burden of his love, in the form of 10 oz. of letters from Martha, is promptly burnt. For Jimmy Cross it weighs much more than only 10 oz., comparing the burden of love to a collapsing tunnel; “The stresses, the fractures, the quick collapse, the two of the buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love” (O’Brien, 11).

Rat Kiley, the medic, not only carries with him plasma and morphine, but also comic books – perhaps for distraction – and even M&M’s for the especially badly wounded. This indicates that he might as well give the dying or fatally wounded soldier some piece of home in the form of candy. The Native American soldier, Kiowa, carries the New Testament symbolizing the new faith of the natives in USA. But more importantly he carries some of his tribes past resentments towards the white people; “Kiowa also carried his grandmother’s distrust of the white man, his grandfather’s old hunting hatchet” (O’Brien, 3). The machine gunner Henry Dobbins, being a big man,

carries the heaviest weapons and extra ammunition. Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk carry between them dental floss, tanning lotion, bars of soap and Dr. Scholl's foot powder, an indication that they are preoccupied with their appearance, no matter whether they are at war or not. The ever-so-nervous Ted Lavender carries his tranquilizers of course and some load of premium dope. Lavender's nervousness is due to him being at war, which is for him a heavy burden. This is demonstrated when he is killed and drops like a sandbag; "He went down under an exceptional burden" (O'Brien, 6).

The Alpha Company carry symbols of the USA, not all of them being necessities. They carry chewing gum, chewing tobacco, candy, Kool-Aid, iced beer, soda pop and the Stars and Stripes. Many of them carried talismans, Jimmy Cross carried a pebble from Martha as a good-luck charm, Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot to fend off evil spirits and Norman Bowker, the gentle soldier, carried with him something as grotesque as a thumb from a dead Vietnamese. The weapons of choice also serve to demonstrate some of their personalities. Lee Strunk, somewhat childish and cocky, carries a slingshot. Mitchell Sander carries brass knuckles and Kiowa, the Native American, carries his grandfather's old feathered hatchet. Some of them carried Toe Poppers and Bouncing Betties. Some of them carried pieces of Vietnam too, not only the statuettes of the smiling Buddha or the joy stick, but also they carried the land itself, they carried the sky, the atmosphere, the humidity, monsoons, decay, fungus and gravity.

They not only carry the physical burden of being at war, but also their emotions and guilt, which prove just as heavy. They carry the burden of being alive when others are not and the burden of showing that they were not afraid to die or get wounded; "They carried their own lives" (O'Brien, 15).

They dreamt of the freedom birds, relieving them of the heavy burden and taking them home; "...just riding the light waves, sailing that big silver freedom bird over the mountains and oceans, over America, over the farms and great sleeping cities and cemeteries and highways and the golden arches of McDonald's" (O'Brien, 23). They could feel the weight falling off their shoulders as they headed home. They all dream of being light and free, and returning to America. Getting rid of your burden meant you were heading home.

Allegory of a Pilgrimage

The Things They Carried can be seen as an allegory of a Christian pilgrimage in more than one way. The most obvious pilgrimage is the soldier's deployment in the Vietnam War, but one can also view the writing process of the book as Tim O'Brien's personal pilgrimage. In the first chapter of the book we get a detailed description of the soldiers' burden, both emotional and physical. This description gives us a hint of what the purpose of the journey is, for as Alex Vernon points out the soldiers are taking on a moral journey with the possibility of a spiritual salvation. The book asks two questions in this regard: "Can a veteran achieve moral or spiritual redemption through storytelling?" and, "Is it possible to gain any spirituality through modern warfare?" (Vernon, internet, 2). *The Things They Carried* looks into the subject of salvation, or the question whether one can achieve moral and spiritual redemption through storytelling. For Tim O'Brien the real pilgrimage is the process of storytelling, rewriting the stories, with different truths and from different angles, trying to come to terms with the experience of war.

According to Vernon, Tim O'Brien retells the stories of Christ in several variations and he states that O'Brien wants us to "read *The Things They Carried* as a literary analogue of the New Testament. The infantry platoon is led by the lieutenant with the significant last name and initials" (Vernon, internet, 3). The subject of religion or Christianity is not often directly mentioned or discussed, but in the chapter "Church", the subject of religion is dealt with directly. Alpha Company comes across an almost abandoned pagoda. The residents of the pagoda happen to be a few monks. They welcome the company and while treating them all nicely, Jimmy Cross indeed gets special treatment. Lieutenant Cross is offered a seat near the altar in their special chair, which obviously is reserved for important people, making the monks immensely proud. While O'Brien never mentions what kind of monks they have come across or what kind of altar it is, it could just as well be Christian monks and a Christian altar with a cross, even though, giving the fact that the war takes place in Vietnam and the monks most likely are Buddhist monks and the altar therefore a Buddhist altar. The monks take a special liking to Henry Dobbins, calling him the good soldier Jesus. The religious Henry

Dobbins has a conversation about religion and faith with the equally religious Native American, Kiowa, the discussion especially focused on what they will do with their faith, coming to the conclusion that Kiowa likes churches: “The way it feels inside. It feels good when you just sit there, like you’re in a forest and everything’s really quiet....”, but that, Dobbins does not care for them at all: “All these years, man, I still hate church” (O’Brien, 122). While normal Christian ceremonies usually take place in churches, which then again usually are situated in town centers, the pilgrims usually seek God in nature or in distant places, removing themselves from their usual surroundings, responsibilities and obligations. This makes them free to focus on spirituality and their inner experience. You can easily apply this to not only Henry Dobbins and Kiowa, but to all the American soldiers deployed overseas. Dobbins and Kiowa obviously do not need churches or altars to worship God; they have gone to the edge of the world, leaving civilization behind in America.

The first chapter of *The Things They Carried* gives us a very detailed description of the soldier’s physical burden and more importantly their emotional baggage. This reiterates that the journey they are taking is not only, or just about, missions in war, but also their moral and spiritual journey, seeking first and foremost a spiritual salvation. Because pilgrimage could be seen as “an amplified symbol of the dilemma of choice versus obligation” (Vernon, internet, 8), the pilgrimage is indeed also about choice. Going to war is in O’Brien’s case not necessarily his obligation but rather his own choice. O’Brien had the opportunity to avoid going to war, becoming a conscientious objector, but chooses to meet his obligations, and goes to war.

Vernon compares *The Things They Carried* to one of the best known Christian allegories, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Just as with the case in *The Things They Carried*, the protagonist’s name in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian, also clearly indicates a religious allegory. However, Vernon questions whether it is necessarily Jimmy Cross that is the counterpart to Christian, indicating that it might just as well be the author O’Brien himself. Like Christian, it is O’Brien who is on the quest for salvation and sets out on this pilgrimage. Vernon points out the similarities in Christian’s three main experiences to those of the soldiers, and specifically O’Brien’s; “The Manner of his Setting Out” could be O’Brien’s pre-war experience, in particular

the one we learn of in the chapter “On the Rainy River”, “His Dangerous Journey” resembles O’Brien’s, and the other soldiers, war-time journey, and finally “Safe Arrival” could represent O’Brien’s post-war self (Vernon, internet, 4). O’Brien is now sitting at home writing about his experience. Vernon also points out that the deployed soldiers undergo three different “rituals of passage” initially described by Arnold Van Gennep. The first is the rite of separation – when the persons are removing themselves from their usual surroundings and away from their social network, the second is liminal rite – the characters are passengers between two places, states, or conditions, or area on the move. The third rite is rite of incorporation – the persons are welcomed back to the civilization and can resume their normal life (Vernon, internet, 7).

Just as Jesus functions as a storyteller or narrator, miracle worker and the revealer of the truth in the Christian religion, Tim O’Brien has the same function in *The Things They Carried*. It is not O’Brien’s intention as such to resurrect the dead, even though the persons get killed only to be mentioned later in the book. Instead it could be seen as the writer’s attempt to gain some positive memories from the war and positive meaning. Emotionally strained and feeling guilty that he survived whereas many of his comrades did not, O’Brien’s way of seeking salvation and higher meaning has become the ritual act of writing the book. According to Vernon, *The Things They Carried* is not a war story but a rather a post war-story, the narrator is at his desk at home, not at war. “Nam” is not necessarily a place in Asia, but is just as well a state of mind: “You don’t have to be in Nam to be in Nam” (Vernon, internet, 7).

Metafiction and the True War Story

The Things They Carried can be seen, according to several critics, as a work of metafiction. Several of the stories focus more on the writing process than the actual storyline, as defined by Catherine Calloway:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose

questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Calloway, 251-252)

According to Calloway, in order to stay true to the metafiction, Tim O'Brien focuses on the two elements that he feels is important in a war story, i.e. the imagination and the fiction. Some of the stories focus on the relationship between these two, while some of the other stories just indirectly hint at this relationship. Many of the stories and some of the chapters even discuss and focus on writing technique and form. An example is the chapter "Notes" that discusses the writing process of the previous chapter "Speaking of Courage".

At first glance the reader might come to the conclusion that *The Things They Carried* is an autobiography or Tim O'Brien's memoirs. O'Brien starts by dedicating the book to the Alpha Company: "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa" (O'Brien, n.p.). It is implied later, however, that these men did not exist, hence this might not be a memoir after all. The fact that the narrator in the book has the same name as the author could or should be a clear indicator of an autobiography, but while having a similar background and both being writers, it is nonetheless indicated that the book's Tim O'Brien does have a daughter named Kathleen, whereas the real Tim O'Brien does not. In several places in *The Things They Carried* it is suggested that it is not at all an autobiography, but just a work of fiction. Marilyn Wesley points out that instead of writing an autobiography or a memoir from the war, Tim O'Brien suggests that the truth is more clearly delivered through storytelling – whether true or fictional. The line between those two becomes blurred and it thereby results in the reader truly knowing more about the soldiers' experience during the time of war (Wesley, 2).

Steven Kaplan points out that in the first chapter of the book O'Brien lists every item the soldiers are carrying, both the physical and concrete things as well as their emotional baggage. O'Brien gives the reader a detailed description of each item,

including size and weight, as well as detailed descriptions of the background and feelings of many of the members of the Alpha Company. This should immediately indicate that the book is a work of fiction as it would be impossible for the author to meticulously list every item or every feeling. Kaplan also mentions that even in the beginning of the book O'Brien indicates the conflict of truth versus fiction. The book opens with the notion that it is a work of fiction (*The Things They Carried* – a work of fiction by Tim O'Brien), only to be, little later, lovingly dedicated to the members of the Alpha company.

The stories in this book are not truer than the actual things that happened in Vietnam because they contain some higher, metaphysical truth.....Rather, these stories are true because the characters and events within them are being given a new life each time they are told and retold. (Kaplan, 47)

According to Kaplan, O'Brien wants the reader to believe what they read is the truth, in order for them to gain an insight into and understanding of what really happened during the Vietnam War.

The fact that *The Things They Carried* consists of twenty-two different sized chapters, some merely a couple of pages while others are substantially longer, demonstrates the fact that the truth of the war might perhaps be impossible to learn. O'Brien structures his chapters in such a way that the reader questions whether the stories are true or not, even though the stories are told in such a way as being true. He starts telling a story, abandons it, only to take it up and finish it later in another chapter, often with another narrator. It is O'Brien himself that challenges the reader to determine whether the stories are truth or fiction (Calloway, 252). More than once O'Brien states that some of the stories are true, only to state the opposite a few or several pages later. A good example of this is the story of the death of Curt Lemon. O'Brien tells us the story stating that it is "all exactly true", only to point out later that he has told the story "many times, many versions". This makes the reader question the verity of the stories and incidents. Wesley comes to a similar conclusion. She points out that O'Brien has come to the conclusion that the real truth is not only told once, but the writer, or narrator,

must repeatedly alter the story, add details, omit detail, or change the story by making things up (Wesley, 13).

Instead of focusing solely on the “physical” effects of war i.e. death and suffering, O’Brien also discusses, to a somewhat greater extent the “culture” of war. According to Wesley it is the gap between these two things that is the truth, not, as is the common practice, the reality of the war, but the possibility of revision of what happened during the war. The result of the blurred line could explain why the story has a surrealistic touch. John H. Timmerman notes that *The Things They Carried* contains several elements of surrealism. There is this interaction between imagination or fantasy, and the reality of the horror of war. Like Tim O’Brien points out himself in an interview:

In war, the rational faculty begins to diminish . . . and what takes over is surrealism, the life of the imagination. The mind of the soldier becomes part of the experience – the brain seems to flow out of your head, joining the elements around you on the battlefield. It's like stepping outside yourself. War is a surreal experience, therefore it seems quite natural and proper for a writer to render some of its aspects in a surreal way. (cited in Timmerman, 135)

Timmerman points out that the real reason for the fictive “true” war story, as opposed to the factual one is that no one wants to hear the real truth about what happened, so the writers must come up with the fictive stories, surreal or not, in order to get the reader to engage in the events of the Vietnam War.

Many of the stories in *The Things They Carried* are ambiguous. A good example of this is especially demonstrated when O’Brien tells the story of Curt Lemon’s death. O’Brien insists, to begin with, that it is all true, only, eight pages later, to state that he has told this story many times before in many different versions, and then continues on telling us a new version of Lemon’s death. The fact that O’Brien hints at this makes the reader doubt every tale in the book (Calloway, 252). Rat Kiley’s story of Mary Ann Bell also becomes ambiguous as Kiley firmly states the story is true, even though he is, according to the narrator, prone to exaggerate, whereas others, e.g. Mitchell Sanders,

admits that his story is not entirely true (Calloway, 252). Calloway also points out that the stories are not only told by O'Brien the narrator, but also by some of the other soldiers. In this way O'Brien gives the other members of the Alpha Company a voice, often bringing the dead soldiers back to life through flashbacks, giving them voices as well. The deceased persons are brought back to life, giving us descriptions of the characters, their life and death. This is in particular the case with the story, or stories, of the Vietnamese soldier that O'Brien might have killed. O'Brien tells us about the man he killed giving us a detailed description of his death, only, some chapters later to give us a detailed description of his life as he imagined how it would have been and had been. In the chapter following immediately after, O'Brien states that he did not kill the soldier, he only witnessed the killing, only to take this story back as well:

Twenty years ago 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. I remember his face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

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 than happening truth. (O'Brien, 179)

The reader is left wondering, did O'Brien kill the Vietnamese soldier or did someone else kill him, or was he killed at all, as O'Brien states?

So what is a true war story? Calloway points out in her essay that:

"A true war story is never moral," the narrator states. "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (76). Furthermore, a true war story has an "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (76), is embarrassing, may not be believable, seems to go on forever, does "not generalize" or "indulge in abstraction or analysis" (84), does not necessarily

make "a point" (88), and sometimes cannot even be told. True war stories, the reader soon realizes, are like the nature of the Vietnam War itself; "the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity" (88). "The final and definitive truth" (83) cannot be derived, and any "truths are contradictory" (87). (Calloway, 252)

This is somewhat disputed by Timmerman as he argues that the writer will, or could at least be capable of, adding their own moral lessons to their experience, in order to get the reader to understand the events during the war (Timmerman, 112). Wesley agrees somewhat with Timmerman stating that *The Things They Carried* is partly a moral evaluation of the Vietnam War. Vietnam War stories require the truth as a standard to give the readers the most factual description of the war. The authenticity is the norm of what most writers tell us. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a contradiction between the authenticity and the moral evaluation of the war. O'Brien focuses on the effect the war has on the soldiers instead of focusing on literary realism. He shows us through his work the violent disorder during war, but omits the strategic discussions completely. We get an insight into the soldiers' feelings while "carrying the responsibility of power through the violent landscape" (Wesley, 6).

Tina Chen points out that O'Brien is obsessed with telling a true war story. The truth, as O'Brien sees it, is not the realistic account of the Vietnam War but to a greater extent the relationship between truth and fiction (Chen, 77). He mentions story-truth as opposite of the happening-truth: "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (O'Brien, 83). Chen furthermore argues that the book is in the end not about war as such, but about the somewhat difficult choices and decisions the soldiers had to make during the Vietnam War. Timmerman agrees with Chen, saying that the Vietnam War story is not only about the war, i.e. the rise and fall of the participating nations, but about "the rise and fall of the dreams of the individual soldiers – their hopes riddled by disillusionment, their fantasies broken by shrapnel" (Timmerman, 100). Instead of only focusing on the reality of war, giving a statistical and historical account of the events, it should focus just as well on the soldiers' dreams, expectations and thoughts. Tim O'Brien aims to combine these two focuses in his stories, i.e. the reality of the war and the reality of the human spirit (Timmerman, 101).

According to Tim O'Brien himself the truth about the Vietnam War should be told by writers of fiction, not by fictions created by politicians. O'Brien destroys the line between truth and fiction as the fiction often can be truer than the truth (Kaplan, 44). The fact that the war was uncertain, gave the fiction writers a certain liberty to discuss courage, cowardice, fears and fantasies, and the combat veteran the opportunity to write about both the inner and external experience. O'Brien points out in *The Things They Carried* the whole point of the true war story "in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about true war story, except maybe 'Oh'" (O'Brien, 77).

Conclusion

In *The Things They Carried* O'Brien uses various literary techniques, thus giving the book more depth, revealing that the book is so much more than just a war story. O'Brien uses metaphors and symbols to personify various elements in the book. Both the USA and Vietnam are represented, the symbol for the USA is Mary Ann Bell, and the symbol for Vietnam is the dainty young man O'Brien perhaps killed. Especially Mary Ann Bell's change in behavior, turning ruthless and somewhat grotesque, can be seen as the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Being an All-American girl when we first meet her she gradually turns violent and ugly. A parallel can be drawn between her and the USA's involvement in the war, and even more how the world viewed the USA. Innocent and pure was the common view of the Americans, or at least it was how the Americans would like to be seen, before their involvement in Vietnam, but during the Vietnam War this changed. Now the outside world saw the Americans as being brutal and ruthless. The young man that Tim O'Brien might – or might not – have killed can easily be seen as the symbol for Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. According to O'Brien the young soldier was somewhat reluctant to go to war and wanted nothing more than to marry his sweetheart and be a maths teacher. This contrast between Mary Ann Bell and the dead Vietnamese soldier demonstrates the inequality of the Vietnam War. O'Brien also uses figures of speech when describing the Vietnam War itself – the war being so much more than just a war, the war was a cocktail party that was gate-crashed and the enemy was a ghost called Charlie Cong. The reason for

this extensive use of figurative language might be a way for O'Brien to come to terms with the war, and being his way of describing the war.

When describing his fellow members in the Alpha Company, O'Brien yet again uses figurative language, drawing similarities between the company leader, Jimmy Cross, to Jesus Christ. Jimmy Cross is, just like Jesus Christ, surrounded by disciples and they are indeed embarking on a spiritual and emotional journey – a pilgrimage, during their deployment in Vietnam. This moral and spiritual journey is not only taken on by the members of the Alpha Company during their stay in Vietnam, but by O'Brien as well in writing the stories. He also seeks some kind of spiritual redemption through his writings. A comparison has been pointed out between *The Things They Carried* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which both Tim O'Brien and the main protagonist in *Pilgrim's Progress* both take on a similar journey.

Last but not least, *The Things They Carried* is a metafiction, metafiction being, according to Calloway, a term that is given to fictional writing that draws attention to the relationship between truth and fiction. O'Brien himself points out that no one wants to hear about what really happened in Vietnam, so the writer must – and has the freedom to – add their own moral lessons, thus making the stories even truer. O'Brien points out that the story-truth is truer than the happening-truth.

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