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Cowardice and Bravery in *The Things They Carried*

As a war and the definition of a time period, Vietnam existed as the confusion of most social aspects of society. It was a period of ideological change, where the youth fought to have their voices of peace and equality heard. It was a period of discovery, where the calculative eye turned from earth to the infinite skies. But most of all, this was a time of fear, the fear of an uncertain war with uncertain goals. There was fear of who would be taken to the far east, a place shrouded in death, or who would fall victim to his insecurities, and escape the war altogether. In this period, it was hard to distinguish anything, but for those who were subjected to the scenes of misery and exhaustion told of in *The Things They Carried*, it was a struggle between cowardice and bravery. In this novel, Tim O'Brien explores the blurry distinction of cowardice and bravery, mainly through the voice's implied criticism of war.

To know the distinction is to know the work. The book is written from two different perspectives, the omniscient narrator, and the character of Tim O'Brien. The omniscient narrator is used mainly to show how the soldiers emote and to develop the theme of fiction in war stories. The narration by fictional Tim O'Brien gives the reader insight into the emotions and ideologies that drive the behavior in Vietnam. Both speakers lead us through carefully crafted experiences, which are quite certainly not certain at all. Creating within the reader a lust for understanding, the stories effectively portray the uncertainty of the Vietnam experience. They achieve this by nimbly teasing the reader with loose ends and more unanswered questions. "So just what is courage?

What is cowardice? Mr. O'Brien spends most of the book carefully dissecting every nuance of the two qualities" (Harris 2).

The most pertinent scene that demonstrates the true O'Brien's dissection of the issue is contained in a chapter entitled "On the Rainy River", where the fictional Tim O'Brien contemplates leaving for Canada to escape the draft. The scene is prominently an emotional struggle; we as readers watch Tim weigh the extreme embarrassment and possible ostracism from American society with the realism of the mortality in war. "It was a kind of schizophrenia. A moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile." (O'Brien 44) What the true author reveals about this time is that a recently drafted young man could be deemed a coward no matter what decision he made. It was just a matter of mortal or social cowardice. True bravery could only logically be facing the choice with no hesitation, something that he reveals as an impossibility throughout the novel. The fictional O'Brien embodies this when he says, "I was a coward. I went to the war" (O'Brien 61). This is the clearest instance in the novel where the true O'Brien can reveal to the reader the dual perception of one's actions.

Another duality exists in the appearance of masculinity throughout the book. War, as Lynne Hanley recognizes in *Writing War*, has become a series of formulas through which violence is encoded as a desirable course of action that presents war experience as male, agentless intensification (qtd. in Wesley 1). That ideology demands that a soldier should be strong, calculated, and fearless. In the book, the true Tim O'Brien expresses his criticism of this through the behavior of certain characters. A simple example is when the character Curt Lemon has a run in with the military dentist. Having presumptions of what his dentistry experience will be like, Lemon faints as a natural reaction to the fear. He realizes his little incident will slander his ego all across the squadron, and rips out another tooth; this seemingly proves to his troop as well as

himself that he does not fear something so trivial, which society would consider unmanly. A second example is fictional Tim's revenge on the medical neophyte, Bobby Jorgensen. Afraid that Bobby has replaced him in the troop, Tim uses the guise of an untreated wound to substantiate his anger toward Jorgenson. Tim then tortures him psychologically to reconcile his anger, when the anger was really created as a natural buffer for his fear of death.

The true author O'Brien includes these two instances to convey his criticism of the ideological pressures put on the soldier. Where we as a society expect a soldier to respond to emotional embarrassment through masculine acts, such as mental torture or the self-infliction of pain, O'Brien knew from experience that "the soldiers greatest fear...was the fear of blushing," causing soldiers to act out of "the common secret of cowardice" (Harris 1). Having been introduced to the fear of social cowardice in the "On the Rainy River" chapter, it is easier for the reader to interpret these masculine and irrational acts as the coping mechanism for embarrassment. With the true O'Brien's guidance, the acts of desperate soldiers are related to the average high school struggle for acceptance.

There are those characters that do express their emotion. One act of such social bravery is Rat Kiley's slaughter of the baby water buffalo after the obliteration of his friend, Curt Lemon. Steven Kaplan noted, "The biblical motto of vengeance, 'an eye for an eye...' is literally enacted in a narrative sequence meant to inscribe the sense of just retribution" (Kaplan 5). As many soldiers could not, Kiley was able to express his grief in one of the only scenes where a character bravely faces criticism in light of his emotional behavior. The true O'Brien wanted to show the gruesome reality of pain, but also alluded to the transformation one experiences in war. Where the narration of the scene implies disgust, the voice explores of the theme of social bravery, where the soldier emoted in the only way he knew how, violence. He achieves relating a soldier's inability to

cope with stressors, which is a theme that is seen throughout the book.

The novel explored the emotional aspects of war, but there is also a commentary on the literal aspects of war. The most prevalent discusses the living and the dead. The true O'Brien treats each differently in presentation, with life mirroring a state of cowardice, and death mirroring infinite bravery. To start, the fictional Tim O'Brien is shot in a field while confronting the Viet-Kong. The resulting wound often sears with immeasurable pain, which creates within Tim a hatred for Jorgenson for failing to treat the wound in time. After his confrontation with Jorgenson, he realizes that his revenge and self-pity were a way for him to ignore the fear he felt when he was shot: the fear of death.

The actions of the fictional Tim can correlate to many human instincts. The reader could interpret his actions as an insatiable need for revenge, or even as a way of instilling a lesson. However, the theme of mortal cowardice flows throughout the novel, and is the most likely reason for the author to include this story. As Norman Bowker in the field with Kiowa, and as Kiley in the jungle with Lemon, the living are simply stuck in an inward battle over the fear of death.

Another trait of the living is their aptitude to overreact. When Ted Lavender is shot down, the troop's inability to deal with the loss leads them to torch the nearby village of Than Khe. Those who are left behind in this book show us the worst of humanity, a direct tip of the hat to the author's belief that soldiers cannot cope normally. The true O'Brien created these anecdotes to make simpler the task of accepting the soldier's mentality.

On the other end of the spectrum, the dead in this book are awarded a less traumatic familiarity. Instead of the long paragraphs explaining their pain right before they pass, the text makes light of the fact, and focuses rather on the serene quality to their passing. This is evident in

a few scenes. One is the playful game between Kiley and Lemon, where Lemon accidentally triggers a mine. The fictional Tim's memory of the event focuses on the smile and half step into the sunshine before he was eviscerated, and then the character of Curt Lemon simply ceases to exist. The aftermath is gruesome, but the author put emphasis on the happiness of the moment prior and the suddenness of the death rather than the gore. Other prominent scenes similar to this would be the simple falling over of Ted Lavender when he was killed, or the sinking of Kiowa into the depths of the muck. Although Tim tells of great emotion toward these events, death itself is shown more as a brave acceptance of fate, rather than the agonizing process of remaining alive.

One device that the true O'Brien utilizes in the presence of death is irony. The dead in the novel seem to take on a new life of their own, which O'Brien uses to relate the mental burden one experiences in trying to cope with death. The best example was the chapter "The Man I Killed", where fictional Tim filters through what in the boy's life would have led him to lie where he is. Tim guesses what he would have liked to become, what his family was like, and even his dislike of the reasons for the war. The reader picks up on the mentality of the soldier, the regret of having to even take life in the first place. O'Brien makes it clear that the war progresses in the uncertain lives of those who survived, but those who are certainly dead are those looked upon as the luckiest, and the bravest.

Beyond the physical state of life or death lies the most prominent theme of the book, the presence and absence of truth. Tim O'Brien expressed in an interview with Jonathan D'Amore that what he noticed about war stories is that they fail to address the commonalities between the soldier and the reader. If you are too explicit, you leave the reader in a completely different universe than their own with no map or stars to guide their way. O'Brien preferred rather to place the reader in the world, and share with them all of the emotions and confusion of a soldier by

making every story uncertain and with no proper end: a soldier's truth. (D'Amore 1-6)

One device used to create uncertainty in the stories was surrealism. The text would tell of a horrifying event, but as the mind censors images that will later haunt us, the author censors the words. The true O'Brien drew on this natural psychology, and included such narration in scenes depicting gore, such as Lemon's demise. The scene was so sudden and violent that fictional Tim's mind focused on the half step into the sunshine and the apparent slowing of time to buffer his mind from true distress. "...When he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms." (O'Brien 70) The author realized that is why most war stories appear to be false, because the brutality of an act might ease with a little unconscious fabrication. However, the reader can conclude that to not face the reality of death is another act of mortal cowardice.

Surrealism is also used to portray social pressures. When fictional Tim floats down the Rainy River, he begins to imagine all the figures of his past on the shore. Although this is not happening, the surreal quality to the image intensifies the tension on Tim to make the socially acceptable decision. Surrealism is basically another tool to relate pressures upon a soldier so that the reader can understand why they choose certain acts of cowardice or bravery.

The biggest pressure that the true O'Brien recognizes is the emotional pressure. He intermittently shares with the reader that he writes these stories as fiction to bravely confront the truth of what he experienced in his own arena. It was his personal fight for healing. "Stories, the narrator suggests, can heal the traumatized veteran of the Vietnam War and provoke an amnesiac nation into working through its troubled past" (Blyn 1). He wants us to know this, for it only secures within us the understanding that what he went through was nothing nice, but rather a terrible process full of ideologies and happenings that he resented.

In the perspective of cowardice and bravery, even the true O'Brien cannot face the real truth without his fictitious buffer. He still is afraid of the Vietnam occurrences and his reaction to them, so instead of remaining distant, he as an author takes them head on. "My hope is that when you finish the last page of this book...there is a sense of having experienced a whole life or constellation of lives; that something has been preserved which, if the book hadn't been written, would have been lost, like most lives are." (Coffey 3) O'Brien truly wanted to immortalize the voices of those who fought for an uncertain cause, and his thoughts on the ideologies and actions of a time period. In short, O'Brien wanted to give us the realest war experience possible.

And he does. His actions as an author and the actions of his characters give us great insight into war's standards of bravery and cowardice. O'Brien expresses the duality of one's actions, and the blurry distinction between them created by the embarrassment of emotion, and the physicality and implications of life and death. From within the deep and mysterious depths of the Vietnam jungle, Tim O'Brien is able to achieve an author's greatest goal, which is to create a world of truth where "you suspend disbelief and you're dreaming along with the dreamer of that story" (D'Amore 4). Having dreamt alongside him, I have achieved a greater understanding of war, cowardice and bravery.

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Thesis Statement: Tim O'Brien establishes and explores the blurry distinction of cowardice and bravery, mainly through the voice's implied criticism on war through emotion and embarrassment, life and death, and finally the presence of truth, surrealism, and fiction.

## I. Emotion / The Embarrassment of Emotion

### A. On the Rainy River

1. On the Rainy River is the chapter that best establishes the gray area between cowardice and bravery. The character of Tim O'Brien bravely chooses to go to war but feels he has done so out of fear of embarrassment.
2. This chapter explores the emotional pull of society on actions of the individual.
  - a). Voice criticizes the ideologies in war.
  - b). Presents fear of being ostracized.

### B. The Appearance of Masculinity

1. Curt Lemon's visit to the dental ward.
  - a). He receives the unnecessary procedure to prove to himself that he is brave.
  - b). Lemon acts out of the fear of appearing non-masculine.
2. Tim's revenge against Bobby Jorgenson.
  - a). Tim believes that he is getting revenge for Bobby's cowardice on the field and failure to treat his wound.
  - b). Tim reflects on the scene and realizes that he is jealous of Bobby's new status in the troop, and replaced a fear of death with anger.

### C. Realization of Death

1. Some characters would face the reality that their friends were dead.
  - a). When Rat Kiley attack the water buffalo, the narrator states that the troop believes his actions are rash. However, they are still not able to feel anything after Lemon's death. Rat Kiley is the only one who could let loose the fear of being judged and express the emotions he was feeling after losing a

friend. His selfish act of mutilation was also one of social bravery.

2. Some characters cannot cope with the death of a friend.

- a). Norman Bowker commits suicide after years of blaming himself for Kiowa's death. It is an act of emotional cowardice.

### C. Emotional Reaction

1. The author shows reverence for the bravery of certain individuals in the face of tragedy.

- a). In the Style chapter, the troop encounters a small girl who is dancing amongst her dead family. When Azar later mocked her dance, Henry Dobbins gets defensive of her brave ritual.

2. The author shows disgust toward individuals who act selfishly.

- a). Rat Kiley as he maims the water buffalo.

## II. Life and Death

### A. Life

1. Life is pictured as an act of cowardice in the novel.

- a). The story tells more of the suffering of the wounded rather than the suffering of the dead.
- b). Many characters have the fear of admitting the possibility of death.
- c). When Ted Lavender is killed, the troop goes on to burn the village of Than Khe. The act is a cowardly attempt at comforting themselves with the death of innocents.

### B. Death

1. Death is pictured in the novel as an accepted happening.

- a). Kiowa was described as disappearing into the muck, almost as if he went to sleep at the bottom of a pool.
- b). Curt Lemon is pictured as smiling and taking an awkward half step before

his death. The sunlight and the surreal quality of the memory create the impression that Curt knew what was under his next step.

- c). Ted Lavender simply fell over when he died. It was so simple, and much less dramatized than the injury scenes of the novel.

## 2. Irony in Death

- a). There is an understanding of the dead in The Man I Killed chapter. Tim spends time humanizing the dead man, retelling his life up to the battle. It gives emphasis to the normality of death.

### III. Truth, Surrealism, and Fiction

#### A. Truth

1. Truth is not often addressed in this novel. It is Tim O'Brien's wish to give the impression of what the experience in Vietnam feels like, not what actually happened.
2. There are passages which demonstrate the real occurrences, but are somewhat fabricated. In the scene where Tim goes to visit the field where Kiowa died, he buries shoes in the river to symbolize his last respect to his fallen friend. In an interview, he admits that was false, but he dreamt revisiting to do the same thing.

#### B. Surrealism

1. Surrealism is used as the character's coping device in a traumatic situation.
  - a). The heavenly quality to the scene when Curt Lemon died.
  - b). The judgmental voices of Tim's family when he is on the Rainy River.
  - c). The movements and behavior of the drugged Maryanne.

#### C. Fiction

##### 1. As a Device

- a). Helps implant emotions and visualizations that cannot be described, but rather left up to the imagination to construct the experience.
- b). Leaves the morals undefined, and the lines between real life and the surreal war are blurred.

## 2. The Unhappenings

- a). Throughout the novel, O'Brien reminds us that certain passages are false, and were created to give us the feel. However, these passages are written by a fictitious author. The whole novel is uncertain.
- b). Tim O'Brien admits in an interview that he wrote false passages to cope with the guilt and grief he experienced after war. He believes that it is cowardly to shroud the war in your mind by creating images, but it also is his way of bravely confronting Vietnam.

## IV. The Conclusion

- A. Tim O'Brien used a cryptic novel to express the connection between emotion and embarrassment, life and death, and truth and fiction. These themes help to express his thoughts on the presence of cowardice and bravery in war, and the possibility that they can be the very same.