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The Myth-Shattering Courage of Tim O'Brien

Ah for a young man
all looks fine and noble if he goes down in war,
hacked to pieces under a slashing bronze blade
he lies there dead. . .but whatever death lays bare
all wounds are marks of glory. (Homer 22.83-87)

Even as we are influenced by ancient myths such as *The Iliad*, where war is extolled and the valorous warrior praised, modern novels such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (*TTC*) challenge those very notions. Like *The Iliad*, *TTC* is about war. It is about battles and soldiers, victory and survival, yet the message O'Brien gives us in *TTC* runs almost contradictory to the traditional war story. Whereas traditional stories of war take place on corporeal battlefields where soldier battles soldier and the mettle of man is tested, O'Brien's battle occurs in the shadowy, private place of a soldier's mind. Like the Vietnam war itself, *TTC* forces Americans to question the foundations of their beliefs and values because it calls attention to the inner conscience. More than a war story, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is an expose on personal courage. Gone are the brave and glorious warriors such as those found in the battle of Troy. In *TTC*, they are replaced by young men who experience not glory or bravery, but fear, horror, and a personal sense of shame. As *mythic* courage clashes with the modern's experience of it, a battle is waged in *TTC* that isn't confined to the rice-patties, jungles, and shit-fields of Vietnam. Carrying more than the typical soldier's wares, O'Brien's narrator is armed with an arsenal of feelings and words that slash away at an invisible enemy that is the myth of courage, on an invisible battlefield that is the Vietnam veteran's mind.

An analysis of structure in *TTC* is important to our exploration of courage within the narrative, because it creates an atmosphere in which belief must be suspended. What the reader *experiences* while reading the novel, is entirely different from what he *expects* from a typical war story. Absolutes must be absent from the text, if O'Brien is to illustrate how *any* of our mythologies, including courage, frequently fail to meet up to actual experience.

As many have noted, O'Brien ingeniously facilitates a mood of incongruity, or disconnection, between fiction and fact in *The Things They Carried* through sheer structure. By blurring lines between fantasy and reality, *TTC* truly becomes a contradiction of itself. As Catherine Calloway notes, one of the ways in which O'Brien achieves this blurring of lines, is to model the narrator of *TTC* after himself, a drafted Vietnam war veteran, a Harvard graduate, and a writer with the same name of Tim

O'Brien (para. 3). O'Brien is aware that the practiced reader knows not to confuse the narrator with the author, and yet the reader is encouraged to do just that. The purpose, of course, is to keep the reader as unbalanced, as unsure, of what we are told to be truths, as is the Vietnam soldier.

Another way in which O'Brien blurs fiction and fact is through his narrator's (heretofore referred to as Tim), constant and contradictory claims as to the veracity of his stories. One moment Tim swears that a story is true, such as in the chapter "The Man I Killed," when he speaks so realistically and in such detail, about killing an enemy soldier (*TTTC* 141), but later on, in the chapter "Good Form," Tim decides that "[i]t's time to be blunt," that he must confess, "[e]ven *that* story is made up" (203). Between an author that refuses to make distinctions between what is real and what isn't, and a narrator that does the same, O'Brien has craftily constructed a world in which we are forced to find truth through sensation, through the *experience* the stories create, rather than factual data, which is precisely how we really learn anything, including our personal sense of courage.

O'Brien's brilliant juxtaposition of fact and fiction not only forces the reader to search for an underlying truth in the bevy of contradictions, but it demonstrates how very much we require myth in our everyday lives--how very much we rely on having someone *tell* us what is right or true. Whether a story is true or not means little to the narrator of *TTTC*. We are to care not so much about the factualness of his stories, as to the gut reactions they create. As narrator Tim says, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (O'Brien 203).

As a reflection of the ambiguities of the inner world, as well as the Vietnam war itself, *TTTC*'s structure continually reminds the reader that things aren't always what they seem or what we'd like to think they are. *TTTC* attempts to shatter myths about war that Americans, previous to Vietnam, had clung and even aspired to in their personal lives. As Ken Lopez puts it, the purpose of *TTTC* is "to explore not only the moral quagmire of the Vietnam war but also the moral ambiguity of modern life--our self-deceptions and compromises--and to thus reveal the essential nature of our humanity" (para. 10). Until the Vietnam war, one of America's greatest self-deceptions was the myth of the glory of war and the synonymous soldier of "valor" and "courage." After the war, of course, many of these old, mythic notions were challenged and made uncertain by the real experiences of the Vietnam veterans. "Almost all of the literature on the war," says Steven Kaplan, "both fictional and nonfictional, makes clear that the only certain thing during the Vietnam War was that nothing was certain" (para. 1). As a member of that generation of writers, O'Brien is a master at illustrating the ambiguities of myth as it collides with actual experience, and the myth of courage--defining what it is vs. how it is felt, is an essential question in *TTTC*. As O'Brien puts it, "my passion as a human being and as a writer intersect in Vietnam, not in the physical stuff but in the issues of Vietnam--of courage, rectitude, enlightenment, holiness, trying [to] do the right thing in the world" (qtd by Coffey, para. 15).

In *TTTC*, O'Brien attacks unrealistic notions of courage by contrasting external mythologies to internal mythologies and comparing them both to experiential truths.

O'Brien begins to make these contradistinctions right from start, as he presents the external mythology of courage in opposition to the experience of his soldiers. Narrator Tim says, "the war [is] entirely a matter of posture and carriage" (15). This is not merely a reference to how the soldiers must stand or how they carry their packs. It is also about the things the soldiers carry in their minds, and the "posture" they must maintain is the facade of bravery in the face of immense fear. To Tim and his comrades, "the hump [is] everything," and to fall from such pressures is to be labeled a coward or worse, unmasculine. The fear of being "found out" not by the enemy, but by their peers, is what makes these soldiers act with "macho zeal. They [are] afraid of dying but they [are] even more afraid to show it" (19). External notions of courage force the soldiers in *TTC* to act differently from how they feel inside, and although "[f]or the most part they carr[y] themselves with poise, a kind of dignity" (18), each and every soldier is aware that "they [are all] actors" (19).

For O'Brien, the irony is that by *acting* courageous as defined by external myth, the soldiers learn themselves to be cowards. They simply want "to avoid the blush of dishonor," and they are even willing to "[die] so as not to die of embarrassment" (21). The point is that the soldiers are *too afraid of the consequences of not acting courageous to be courageous enough to admit to their cowardice*. This experience of the soldiers--the conflict between what is considered courage on the outside and what is known to be cowardice within, is one of O'Brien's greatest achievements in shattering our traditional notions of courage.

Issues of courage and cowardice are certainly more than peripheral themes in *TTC*. Indeed, being a courageous individual, or failing to live up to his own expectations of courage, is a very critical problem for the narrator. We are first made aware of Tim's personal battle with courage when he struggles to determine whether to run from the draft or succumb to it. The public perception of what connotes courage is so influential that Tim's very decision to go to Vietnam is based entirely on cowardice, rather than courage. "Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it," says Tim, "just take off and run like hell and never stop" (48), but Tim *does* stop--because he is *afraid* not to. "I feared the war, yes," he says, "but I also feared exile. . .[and] losing the respect of my parents" (48):

I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table. . .coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O'Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. (O'Brien 48)

Tim's lack of courage, proven by what he *knows* to be true experientially, is at complete odds with what his society believes is a courageous and brave act. In going to the war, Tim avoids being labeled a "treasonous pussy" (49), and he avoids experiencing "[h]ot, stupid shame" (54) when facing the public, but in so doing, he also betrays himself, and becomes "ashamed of [his] conscience, ashamed to be" so close to doing what he knows instinctively, is the courageous thing, "the right thing," in running away from the war (54-5).

Although Tim claims to hold the town responsible for his inability to make a break for Canada, ["I held them responsible. By God, yes, I did. All of them -- I held them personally and individually responsible" (48)], there is an issue about courage that, for Tim, goes much deeper than the cowardice of bowing to public opinion. For our narrator, the inability to act courageously is a part of his innate character. Cowardice is a personality trait that he is extremely aware and certainly not enamored, of. Tim becomes the vehicle through which O'Brien explores the conflict between internal mythologies we have about ourselves and our experiential truths. For example, before he makes his decision to enter the war, Tim tries to rationalize his pacifism: "There were occasions, I *believed*, when a nation was justified in using military force. . .and I *told myself* that in such circumstances I would've willingly marched off to battle" (47 emphasis added). On the surface, this internal dialogue seems nothing more than Tim's attempt to qualify his position against the Vietnam war by appealing to an opinion that was popular at the time. But, taken in context to the novel as a whole, and with the story of little Linda in particular, a pattern of behavior emerges.

Significantly, narrator Tim does not reveal the story of little Linda until almost the end of the book. Regressing back to his childhood, Tim tells the story of a time when he and his friend, Linda, go to see a movie that, by its very title *The Man Who Never Was*, is symbolic. "We were in love," says Tim, "[n]ine years old, yes, but it was real love" (262). When his "love" for Linda is challenged by the bullies who take Linda's hat off and expose her loss of hair at school, however, Tim fails to meet up to his own expectations of altruistic and brave behavior from himself. "Naturally I wanted to do something about it, but it just wasn't possible. I had my reputation to think about. I had my pride" (263). We are meant to see a pattern of behavior in Tim that has been with him since the time he was little. Little Tim resorts to standing "off to the side" while Linda is being harassed, "wishing [he] could do things [he] couldn't do" (263), just as adult Tim wishes he could make himself cross the border into Canada. Instead of demonstrating personal courage, Tim is forced to give up his internal mythologies about himself. He is forced to relinquish "that old image of [himself] as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage" (60).

As narrator Tim says, "Sometimes. . .the difference between courage and cowardice [is] something small and stupid" (167). The difference between acting out of courage or with cowardice, however, can frequently be life altering, as we see in the "stupid" incident with the flashlight that gets Kiowa killed. Or, the life altering experience can be one that shatters personal myth, as seen in the results of the "small and stupid" teasing of nine year old Linda. O'Brien's point concerning Tim's personal cowardice and failed expectations is well taken. Tim blames "th[e] little [shit] field," which "ha[s] swallowed so much" (169). "My best friend," he says, "My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage. . .all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud" (210), but Tim's experience of courage, as defined by his society, and more importantly, by his interior person, began to diverge much earlier in his history.

Considering the fate of narrator Tim in *The Things They Carried*, the text may seem to fit more comfortably into the format of a Greek tragedy than an epic war story such as *The Iliad*. *TTC*, however, is a true war story. Not true in the sense of physical fact, but true

to the individual's *experience* of it. Its purpose is to shatter myths that don't acknowledge the reality of events, and in this matter, it serves a very important function, should we want the world to become a more peaceful place. As David R. Jarraway notes in a paraphrase of Kali Tal, "the transformation of national or cultural myths is dependent organically upon the revision of personal myths" (Jarraway 698).

With myth-shatterers such as O'Brien at the helm of modern war novels, the term *courage* takes on new dimensions. It becomes more personal. It requires an honest quest by the individual to discover his or her own internal truths. Once found, we need to have the courage to defend it against the enemy that is public myth, so that none of us are made to fall, as did Tim, upon our own rusty swords.

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