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Mem-War: The Art of Truth In The Literary Non-fiction of The Vietnam War

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Introduction

In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.
- Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried

Creative expression is often born out of conflict. Stories often begin with a problem, art often highlights the tensions that arise from conflict, and even our daily conversations focus around the obstacles that we face and overcome throughout the day. Since conflict and its subsequent resolution is such a large part of life, it is not surprising that creativity is born out of conflict. War is the largest scale conflict that we face, and we face it daily. There is so little peace in the world that it is impossible to think of a time in history that is free of war. The continuity of conflict throughout human history begs the question "is war a human condition?"

War may or may not be a human condition, but expression certainly is, and the most common form of expression is storytelling. We tell stories every day; we start a new one each time someone asks us, "how are you?" Similarly, the sharing of stories is equally as important to telling our own. This is why conversation can be so riveting; we love hearing about other people's lives and comparing and contrasting them to ours. We are interested in stories that are both like and unlike our own because they open our eyes to realities of the world that we have never experienced.

Given this human nature of telling stories and listening to them in return, it is not surprising that memoir, a genre devoted to personal stories, is one of the most popular genres of books read in the United States. The genre grew 400% between the years 2004 and 2008. There is an entire *NY Times* bestseller list devoted to the genre, and some books boast over 40 weeks of being on the list, meaning that they continue to sell in high numbers each week.[1] It seems that everyone and their mother has written a memoir, and in the cases of many famous families this is actually true.[2] The genre is so big and so popular that it warrants being split into many sub-genres, such as food memoir (*Eat, Pray, Love*), pet memoir (*Marley and me*), prison memoir (*Orange is the new black*), so on and so forth. While the popularity of literary nonfiction is fact, the prestige of the genre is lacking.

There are two main reasons that personal narratives are not considered particularly prestigious; one, they are seen as narcissistic. This can be a difficult point to combat, because it is full of oneself to write a life story and then publish it for money. The second reason is that memoirs are hardly ever regarded as exceptional writing. This is because they can be limiting; the common format is first person narrative, they must follow true events, and most are told chronologically. Very few deviate from this

[1] At the time of writing.
[2] The Spears family, for example, is one such family. Britney Spears and her mother, Lynne Spears, have both published memoirs.

standard form. There isn't—on the surface—much room for creativity within a memoir, and this can lead to unimaginative writing. This especially applies to memoirs that are dedicated to traumatic events; while many exist, there are only a small number that are written creatively, meaning that they deviate from the standard memoir format. Most are written as personal accounts instead of as literary nonfiction, meaning that they are told strictly to the point and don't explore any sort of writerly creativity. Although the genre of memoir is fraught with personal accounts that are boring to read, or, like self help books, are not creative literature, there is a wide range of powerful and artfully crafted memoirs that deserve our attention as readers. In fact, it is only these works that embrace and challenge the notion of creativity that are touted as literature.

Within the genre of memoir, I decided to focus on war stories because of the importance I see in how the general public perceives war and the impact these stories have on that perception. For those who have faced war, first and foremost, storytelling is a huge part of rehabilitation. Writing is an incredibly cathartic experience; it helps us make sense of our thoughts by transferring them to a medium that is more tangible to us than our thoughts. The more we talk about something, an event or a feeling, the less power it has over us. I couldn't agree more with this sentiment, and it certainly applies beyond the realm of talking; writing can have the same effect.

Rehabilitation after war, however, usually consists of soldiers sharing stories with each other to work through a shared experience. Often, soldiers do not share their experiences in war with civilians who do not understand what they have been through. Certainly, authors who write about their experiences in war benefit from telling their story, but then what is the purpose of publishing and sharing with a larger audience that they will never meet and with whom they will not have a shared experience? And, how does the audience perceive these texts, and what qualities do the successful ones share? I decided to focus on the literature of the Vietnam War because of the large effort on the behalf of participants in that war to write their stories. Even today, works of literature, fiction and non-fiction, which stem from the Vietnam War, are being produced, some 40 years after the end of the War. These works, from the ones published immediately after the war to the ones being published today, have had a lasting impact on American literature.

I think there is a link between works of memoir that are deeply rooted in creative and artistic writing and how well these memoirs are received as works of literature and ultimately, art. If we consider memoir to be art, then why do we hold it to such a high standard of truth, a standard that is arguably impossible to obtain? I am going to argue that we need to rethink the way we read truth, especially within the genre of memoir. Truth and creativity can go hand in hand, and a change in literature and specifically in war stories

following the Vietnam War started to marry the two in a way that has an emotional impact on the reader that conveys a larger truth about war and thus, an understanding of the experience of war. Furthermore, I will argue that because of this, we should rethink the way that we read memoirs as works that are dedicated to truth; we should view them as works of art that inform history and culture, not as textbooks that give dates and maps of events. Because of the changes in media and perceptions of war, the literature of the Vietnam War became more creative; works focus more on the intense emotions experienced by individuals in war. Readers, however, haven't changed the way they read truth in these more creative works. A broader reading will only lead to a greater understanding of truth itself, and will deepen readers' appreciation for these texts.

History of the Terminology (Memoir v. Autobiography)

If you ask the question, "what is the difference between the words Memoir and Autobiography?" most people will give you an answer that explains each term as its own separate entity. The most common answer will point to memoir being a looser and more creative genre and autobiography being more historical, closer to biography.

Before I started research, I was under this same general impression; that autobiography and memoir are different (albeit similar) forms of writing with different definitions. Research proved me both very wrong and partly right. The terms *memoir* and *autobiography* both have different histories, but essentially describe the same thing: a book that is known by the author, publisher, and reader to be based on the true life of the author. In fact, they are so similar that they are often used to define one another; such is the case with both words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. How does this happen? Because the terms originated separately from one another, they carry very different connotations that stem from the history of their use and the fact that the English language is still defining them. Thus, their meaning is still fluid. Memoir is generally thought to be less factual, more creative, and more story-like than autobiography. Autobiography, in turn, is thought to be a sort of chronological cut and dry account of what has happened in the author's life. Historically, however,

these connotations are exactly opposite of what they used to be, an interesting fact that really makes you think about the true (if there actually is any) difference between the two words and how the English language evolves over time.

Memoir is actually an older term than autobiography, and thus was the first term used to describe writing done by an author that recounted their life from their perspective. It was the only term that described self-life writing until the twentieth century. Rooted in the French word for memory (memoire) the term came into being in the early eighteenth century(Yagoda 2). Initially, the term had a strict connotation of describing writing that was a truthful account of the author's life. Essentially, a memoir was a cut- and –dry life story; a chronological account of the author's life from their birth up until the point of writing. In the *Dictionnaire universel des litteratures*, the two terms and their relationship to one another is described: "Autobiography leaves a lot of room to fantasy, and the one who is writing is not at all obliged to be exact about the facts, as in memoirs"(Yagoda 2). Interestingly, the definition and the connotations of both terms have completely changed since this definition was written.

Autobiography, although used in the above quote to describe and set itself apart from memoir, is a much newer term with a separate and equally

interesting history. It didn't appear until the early nineteenth century, when it was first cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It came about when author D'Israeli put out a book about his life that he described as his "self-biography"(Yagoda 65). In a review of the book, a critic commented that this term didn't really make sense, as it was a combination of Saxon and Greek words. The critic also said, however, that coining the term 'autobiography' would have "seemed pedantic." Pedantic, perhaps, but also a more logical use of Greek, as the roots of the words mean "self" *auto* "life" *bio* "to write" *graph*(Smith and Watson 1). Thus, the critic himself coined the term. Initially, the definition of the word was similar to memoir: self-life writing. When the term was first used, however, it was less associated with truth and more associated with a story told from the writer's perspective that was thus flawed; there was a reason that D'Israeli made up his own word for his writing instead of using the term memoir, which to him did not allow him to only express the events in his life through his own perspective. Initial reactions to autobiography touted them as works where the author "writes for an audience how he wants to be perceived, not exactly how he is truthfully." Thus, a difference in the two words was established.

Presently, the connotations associated with each term are similar to those I had for them; memoir is associated with a more creatively written piece about one's life where as autobiography is thought to be more record-

like and less creative in nature. There isn't a definitive explanation as to why the meanings of these two terms have changed over time, other than the fact that the English language is constantly evolving. I think that a large part of the change stems from the fact that memoir is simply a more artistic sounding word than autobiography; it is unarguably more poetic in nature than the clunky combination of Greek roots(Yagoda 65). This etymology also accounts for the idea that memoir has a more fluid definition, while autobiography is more precise and scientifically factual in nature.

While the connotations of the two words imply different kinds of writing, the actual definitions show that this is not the case. Here are the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions for each:

Autobiography: an account of a person's life written by that person("Autobiography")

Memoir: A historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources, an autobiography or a written account of one's memory of certain events or people.("Memoir")

Both definitions describe a written account of a person's life written from personal knowledge or memory about that person. Both words

describe writing done by one about experiences or events that one has experienced in their life. Thus, the words are actually synonymous in their definitions. It is their connotations that set them apart as separate terms.

Reading Memoir and Truth

It wasn't a war *story. It was a* love *story.*

\- *Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried*

As readers, we treat a story differently when we are certain that it is telling us the truth. Even if a novel (a completely fictionalized work of literature) tells an incredible story, it holds a very different weight than a factual account of a person's life written from their perspective. In his article about memoir, "But Enough About Me," Daniel Mendelsohn makes an important point that illuminates why memoirs affect us differently than novels; a novel tells *a truth* while a memoir tells *the truth*. A singular truth holds more impact because we as individuals can better empathize with a singular truth; each of us has a singular truth. We can examine and relate to larger truths that affect us all, but a singular truth confirms what a larger truth cannot; that this story was someone's actual reality. This is important because it frames how we relate to characters in stories differently; we can imagine the lives presented in novels and in memoirs, but in a memoir we imagine the life presented with the knowledge that it actually happened. It makes us take stock of our own situations in a different way because we see that another person's reality is so different from our own. This goes along with another line of Mendelsohn's article; "In a novel, a truth is imagined. In a memoir, the truth is revealed."

Because of the importance of truth to the reader and memoirs' commitment to truth, the classification of "Memoir" carries a tremendous weight. The repercussions of a memoir being found untruthful are wrought with dire consequences that stem from legal battles to public humiliation; what Oprah watcher doesn't remember when she publicly humiliated James Frey on national television for his gritty, but less than true memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*? In that particular situation, there was backlash and debate over what makes a story entirely true, or not true. While readers certainly marvel over a story that is true, some authors and scholars argue that readers should be more lenient with truth, because if what is written in a memoir is the author's reality then it can be thought of as true. Thus, if what Frey wrote wasn't necessarily true but was his own perceived reality, some would argue that his book could still be called a memoir.[3] This thinking, however, could lead to stories that are completely fictionalized to be published as memoir because "it was the author's reality." Where perceptions can deviate from the "actual truth" and still be acceptable in memoir is when the perceptions are emotional. An example of the blurred line between perceived truth and actual truth that works comes from *Running With Scissors*, a memoir by Augusten Burroughs. In his memoir, Burroughs remembers that a vintage electroshock machine was kept under the stairs of his foster home, and that

[3] This is, of course, a bad example because Frey completely fictionalized large parts of his story; he didn't just have a perspective that differed from those around him.

its presence terrified him. After the book was published, the family who owned the house insisted that there was never a vintage electroshock machine but in fact the object in question was an old vacuum cleaner. The family was incredibly offended and felt that Burroughs had misrepresented them in his memoir. While he certainly didn't portray them positively, he wrote about his perceptions. It doesn't really matter if the machine was a vacuum or an electroshock machine; his perceptions made him believe it was something that would cause him harm. Thus, while Burroughs may not have been telling the truth of the actual situation, he was telling his personal truth; he was afraid of whatever was being kept under the stairs because he believed it would be used to hurt him. This is important in memoir; even if the story is not entirely true (because, as I will discuss later, truth is a tricky thing to pin down) a commitment to a truth, emotional or factual, is necessary.

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful. In his book *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda claims "memoir is to writing as photography is to painting"(239). This is an analogy that supports my notion that memoir is a form of art and should be analyzed as such. Photography has been accepted as art after years of debate; the idea against it being that the lens of a camera simply shows you what you can already see with your own eyes. Many photographs and arguments later, it has been proven that the images cameras produce are not

what we see with our eyes; they do not necessarily show what is actually there, or what is true. Instead, they show what is true through a lens. Doesn't memoir do the same thing? Authors write what is true, but because they are one person with a singular viewpoint (much like a camera with a singular lens) they can only show what is true from their perspective. They present a true story through their lens of memory, of their own narration, and their own framing of the story.

This also brings up another interesting argument, and that is that the author doesn't have creative agency over a memoir, meaning they can't write their interpretations of their emotions or imagine how others might have perceived certain situations, for example. In a self-portrait, the artist paints the way that they perceive themselves, which is not a true representation of what they actually look like. It is an expression, a self-exploration of what they look like, or, how they feel about their looks, or how they perceive themselves or feel they are perceived. If this same logic were applied to memoir, it would be a much more loved and understood genre. The creative expression in memoir is the same self-expression of painting or photography; it simply uses a different medium as a mode of self-expression.

By this same logic, readers should approach the idea of truth differently when they read memoirs; no one complains about the truth of famous

portraiture, yet memoirs are often ripped to shreds if any inconsistencies are found in their pages. Truth is incredibly important because it so largely informs our impressions and reactions to what we are reading. But, there is a way to fictionalize stories that yield a greater understanding, a larger truth, to the reader. Most people, upon first reading *The Things They Carried*, think it is a work of memoir. It is an easy mistake to make because it is written in the form of a memoir. Tim O'Brien uses his own name as the main character of the story and thus shows that he is the narrator of the work as well as the author, the general format for memoir. At the same time, it is a silly mistake because the front cover of the book says (and quite blatantly, I might add) that *The Things They Carried* is "a work of fiction." Why then, are people disappointed when they realize that *The Things They Carried* is a work of fiction? Luckily, it is less disappointment than others because *The Things They Carried* is based on true events, a work of metafiction. Still, the general readership of memoirs want the story to be "true", and are usually devastated to find that a story they believed to be true is in fact a work of fiction.

What I hope to prove in this thesis, however, is that this shouldn't matter, or rather, we need to redefine what we mean by "truth." What do we hope to gain from a "true" story? Chronological facts or some sort of shared understanding? *The Things They carried* speaks to a larger truth about war

that is valuable and should be more appreciated. O'Brien himself addresses this in discussing his beliefs about truth. He sees two kinds of truth, the "story truth" and the "happening truth." He says, "You have to understand about life itself. There is a truth as we live it; there is a truth as we tell it. These two are not compatible all the time. There are times when the story truth can be truer, I think, than a happening truth"(Herzog 120).

What this quote shows is there are many layers to truth, and that if we were not aware of these layers we could miss the point of truth in literature entirely. The "story truth" as O'Brien calls it, is what he focuses on in his writing and is the reason his works are so well received; because they show a larger, essential truth than what actually occurred (the "happening truth"). In *The Things They Carried*, his goal was to get at the "story truth" of what happened in Vietnam, which is why most of the stories in that book are fictionalized. They are all, however, grounded in a happening truth. For example, the character Curt Lemon in *The Things They Carried*, who dies when he is blown up by a hand grenade he was playing catch with, is fabricated. The name, Lemon, the lemon tree where he dies, his thoughts, and the sun, are all imaginary. What we read in *The Things They Carried* is the "story truth." The "happening truth" is that O'Brien witnessed the aftermath of one of his friends being blown up into a bunch of bamboo. O'Brien comments, "That is a way the invention gets at a kind of truth, the

truth in that case is the way the macabre response, which will often link humor to tragedy, can diffuse horror or at least make it endurable"(Herzog 121). While it may have made the story endurable for O'Brien, what it does for the reader is give a background that allows the death of Lemon to have a greater emotional impact; here, the "story truth" is truer than the "happening truth" would have been. We as readers are much more invested in the story because we feel the pain and horror of watching someone die from the imaginary part that O'Brien made up. The fact, 'I saw my friend die' is horrible, but does not have the same impact as the entire "story truth" that O'Brien presents.

Memoir and Narcissism

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others.

\- *Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried*

It is difficult to argue that memoir is not a narcissistic genre. How can one successfully argue that writing about oneself is not a narcissistic act? Writing a memoir is, without a doubt, narcissistic to a degree. In fact, many authors avoid the genre of memoir for this very reason; they do not want to be seen as so self-involved. Freud in fact was approached many times and asked to write his memoirs, but refused each time, citing narcissism (among other things) as one of the reasons he would never consider writing a memoir(Mendelsohn "But Enough About Me"). William Gass wrote an article for Harper's that was particularly damning to memoirists entitled "The Art of Self: Autobiography in the age of Narcissism." Gass articulates, "[are there] any motives for the enterprise that aren't tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner's head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety?"("The Art of Self"). It is a compelling argument, certainly. Gass goes on to argue that memoirs are essentially useless to the literary canon. In his last paragraph, he argues for fiction over memoir, saying,

> Reading, haven't we often encountered a passage that captured-we think perfectly-a moment in our own lives? In language so apt and beyond our contriving? So mightn't we then collect these, arrange them, if it seems right, chronologically, as Walter Abish suggests in his brilliantly construct- ed book 99: *The New Meaning?* We would demonstrate in this way not the differences between lives but their sameness, their commonness, their com- forting banality. Three or

> four or five such compilations might suffice to serve for all personal histories.("The Art of Self ")

I think Gass is wrong, however, in his argument that narcissism makes memoir useless to the literary canon, and that instead fiction should be used to combine personal histories. Memoir is incredibly important to the literary canon because it does what no other genre can: tell the truthful life story of a person from their perspective. As I've discussed earlier, a memoir reveals a singular truth in a way that is more powerful than fiction. Readers are drawn to memoirs because we love to share our stories as humans; even our personal conversations focus on storytelling. Reading memoir is a way to learn about a life that you would never encounter in your own. In his article, Gass focuses too much on the motivation for writing a memoir as fraught; he thinks one is only driven to write a personal narrative because of an inflated ego. I don't disagree with him that memoir is at its core narcissistic. Where I disagree with him is in that this narcissism is necessarily a bad thing that takes value away from works of literature. Aren't all humans at their core, narcissist? It is hard to argue against this; we think we are the most important. If we didn't, we wouldn't survive. Does that mean people do not have value because we are innately narcissists? While Gass implies that narcissism detracts from the meaning of memoir, ultimately this isn't true.

Gass also throws blame on memoirists as especially narcissistic but doesn't think about other artists or writers. It can't be said that fiction

writers aren't narcissists, or that musicians, painters, or dancers aren't narcissists as well. In fact, any kind of self-expression is inherently narcissistic. Think about it; one of the main points of producing and publicly displaying art is essentially to brag. Artists are showing prowess in a skill they posses and others lack. Even in dance, music, and visual art, they are putting themselves on display in a way that is very similar to writing a memoir. They are exposed and asking to be looked at; they want attention.

While Gass might see this desire for attention as a bad thing, I think it can actually be considered a good thing, too. If we weren't innately narcissists, we might not have such amazing art in our world. Gass doesn't think about the fact that art driven by narcissism makes a voice accessible to the public. In terms of memoir, if the people who pen them didn't think they had a story worth sharing, we wouldn't have any of these stories in our literary canon. And, although Gass argues that everyone's life could be combined into a small number of personal histories, he doesn't take into account that some people have truly incredible life stories that the public can benefit from knowing. What about Ishmael Beah, boy soldier of Sierra Leone? What about Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust? These stories are few and far between, but they illuminate complicated and important parts of our world's history.

Memoir is also very important to the Vietnam War. As I've mentioned earlier, much of the history of Vietnam has been told through personal narratives. If humans weren't driven to share their stories, how different would the history of Vietnam be in our society? Aside from that, the texts I am analyzing are beautifully written, artful pieces of literature that combine imagination and reality in a seamlessly beautiful way. If Tim O'Brien weren't narcissistic enough to write them, we would certainly be missing out on some wonderful writing.

One thing that I think is very interesting is the different standards that critics hold memoir to. This isn't necessarily unfair because of the many cases of fraud seen in the genre, but it is interesting when compared to standards to which other forms of art are held. Literature is considered to be art; it falls under the general heading of creative expression that also includes visual art. If literature is art, then memoir is to literature as self-portraiture is to painting. Think of a famous self-portrait. One of my favorites is Pablo Picasso's. Our society values Picasso's self -portrait in a very different way than it does memoir as a genre. Is self-portrait narcissistic? Yes, of course it is. But, it has long been an accepted form of expression in the world of visual art. Why then, has this thinking not crossed over to literature as well? Some of the reasoning for this is people experience visual art and literary art in very different ways. If we thought of

words as paint, a medium for expression, perhaps it would help our reading of memoirs as less as an act of narcissism and more as an act of artistic expression.

Memory and Trauma

Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

- *Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried*

Memoirs are, of course, deeply rooted in memory, and often these memories are traumatic. The subject matter dealt with in the literature of the Vietnam War is certainly traumatic, and this trauma and the subsequent damage it causes to a person's mind is often long suffered and cannot be undone. In her books on trauma and memory, Cathy Caruth analyzes how trauma works as a pathology, saying, "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it"(Caruth 4). What this means is when a traumatic event occurs, the subject of the event doesn't register what has happened right away. The real trauma comes from the subsequent belated understanding of the event. This can certainly be seen in Tim O'Brien's literature; most of his writing deals with reconciling his memories of the trauma he experienced in the Vietnam War and its aftereffects. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien says, "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (O'Brien 152).

In an interview, O'Brien speaks to his own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and how he has been changed, saying,

> It (PTSD) stays with you, and it affects you in ways that aren't all terrible…it's good to have a little post-traumatic stress syndrome, so you won't get traumatized again. It's like putting your hand in a fire. You do it enough times and you're going to be careful of fire. So although there are negative things associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome, there are positives, too, that are very rarely written about. You learn to survive, and you learn what moral behavior is(Herzog 112).

While some would not agree with his statement that PTSD has some positive effects, what this quote shows is how he has learned to cope with the ways the trauma of the Vietnam War has changed his mind. He has even found a way to think of this syndrome, as he calls it, which has changed him, in a positive light. What then makes the writing of a memoir so difficult are the memories authors are writing about are difficult ones to recall. On top of that, memory is not a perfect lens for 'the truth,' even though people who suffer PTSD often have recurring flashbacks and dreams that play the same traumatic scene over and over again. While this is true, the way we remember is clouded by our perception of events; we remember our emotions, how our body felt physically, and how others treated us.

Scientifically, memory is being studied with fervor. Not much is known about the specifics of memory, such as why we remember some things over others. With brain mapping, scientists can study what parts of the brain are associated with memory storage and recall. They can look at the chemical reactions that occur when we recall memories, and the ones that occur when we make memories. What has been found is that when we

create a memory, a small part of our brain is altered; our neurons create a new synapse bridge. Long-term memories create large synapse bridges that actually change and develop over time, becoming permanent structures in our brains. Each time we recall a long-term memory, our neurons communicate with each other in a new way, creating a synapse bridge that cannot be deconstructed("How Our Brains Make Memories").

Recently, research has been conducted that challenges the long-standing theory about how we recall memory. It has been thought that the way our brains retain memories is much like writing down notes in a notebook; once it's recorded, it is there forever. This theory, however, never really stood up in a lab, so it wasn't studied with much depth. Following 9/11, a postdoctoral researcher took an interest in studying how long-term memory is recalled and even reconstructed over time("How Our Brains Make Memories"). What he ultimately found was certain drugs could alter the way memory was stored, leading to recovery from traumatic events.

Spurred by witnessing a mass shooting, psychologist Alain Brunet decided to study the effects of trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on memory. Because he was primarily interested in how to best rehabilitate people experiencing PTSD, he conducted a study with people as subjects. He found a group of people that had experienced a traumatic event

in their past and experienced some degree of PTSD from the event. He specifically chose subjects who had experienced past trauma (the traumatic event had occurred at least a couple of years before the study) because he wanted to study how to reframe long-term memory. Brunet sat down with his subjects and listened to their stories, then constructed scripts specific to their memories. In following sessions, some subjects where given a drug that interfered with neurotransmitters before they were asked to read their specific script that recounted their traumatic event. Others were given a placebo drug when they were asked to read the specific script. What they found was that the subjects that were given the drug had a progressively easier time rereading their script each time they had a session. The subjects who had been given a placebo did not show the same progress, or were much slower to reconstruct the memory of a traumatic event.

These studies point to two things: one, that traumatic events lead to memories that significantly alter our brains, and two, the high probability that when memory is recalled it is reconstructed over time. This means coping is possible and successful rehabilitation is a very real outcome for people who have experienced trauma. Basically, the way we have been thinking about memory is incorrect; it is not a permanent structure solidified or consolidated in our brains. Instead, it is malleable and each time we recall a long-term memory we reconsolidate it. This means we reframe our memories as we grow. Thus, we need to be more forgiving of 'truth' as

readers because the function of memory is not perfect. We do not remember things perfectly; especially traumatic events because the situation and the emotions connected with the event are recalled with the memory of the event. As we grow, we rehabilitate by recalling the memory and slowly distancing the negative emotions with the recall of the memory, which ultimately changes the memory.

Throughout her own analysis of trauma and its impact on literature, history, and culture, Caruth found that there is some sort of link between trauma and literature. Indeed, her books would not be possible if this weren't true, as they are filled with stories that recount trauma. Caruth says, "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experiences, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing"(3). What she finds in her analysis of Freud's text, and others, is this intersection over and over again. "And it is, indeed, at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet"(Caruth 4).

These quotes ring true for all writing that deals with events of trauma, but particularly in memoirs. Because of the way trauma affects the psyche of a person, it is lived out throughout their lives in the forms of flashbacks. The

flashbacks don't have a clear trigger, and often they bring back memories that had been repressed. Michael Herr says in *Dispatches*, "It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes" (Herr 20). By writing memoirs, people who have experienced traumatic events and are dealing with PTSD can alleviate some of the tension that the knowing and not knowing that Caruth speaks of gives them. This is, essentially, the only way to cope with PTSD, by working through the memories of trauma that cause flashbacks and nightmares.

This then shows us why there is in fact so much literature from the Vietnam War. If the way to cope with a traumatic event is to recall the event and recreate a positive framework around the trauma, then writing is indeed an incredibly valuable tool in this rehabilitation process, especially when other avenues for self-expression are not available. In an interview, Tim O'Brien was asked why he wrote vignettes while he was in Vietnam. His answer is quite interesting; "I don't know why, preferable to writing letters in some ways. A letter seems so personal that you cannot get the full truth out. Writing vignettes instead of letters, I could be more objective, a slight distance. My letters home tended to be full of self-pity and terror"(Herzog

109). It seems that the vignettes he wrote gave him a way to work through his experiences, reframing the trauma he was going through in a way that allowed them to have less power over him. By distancing himself from the trauma while writing about it, expressing it, and recalling the memory of it, he was able to cope with the chaos that surrounded him. The writing of our experiences is a way to express them; and self-expression is certainly inextricably linked to all storytelling. This expression, then, can be seen as cathartic, rehabilitative, and artistic all at once.

It is also undoubtedly certain that truth fades over time; our memories will eventually fail us in small ways. This can be as simple as blending memories together, or restructuring a story you heard someone else tell as our own memory. In his article discussing the narcissism and mendacity of memoirs, David Mendelsohn confronts the idea of faulty memory head on. He had been conducting interviews with Holocaust survivors in a small Australian town that were from the same area of Poland where his own relatives had not survived. This excerpt from his article poignantly addresses the flimsiness of memory even from a relatively recent past:

> I was sitting next to my brother Matt, a photographer, who was shooting portraits of the survivors we were interviewing, and about halfway through the flight some kids toward the back of the plane—a high-school choir, I think it was—began singing a seventies pop song

> in unison. Matt turned to me with an amused expression. "Remember we sang that in choir?" he asked.
> I looked at him in astonishment. "Choir? You weren't even in the choir," I said to him. I'd been the president of choir, and I knew what I was talking about.
> Now it was his turn to be astonished. "Daniel," he said. "I stood next to you on the risers during concerts!"
>
> Matt was talking about a shared history from 1978—a comparatively recent past. The people we'd just spent ten days with, struggling to find the keys that would spring the locks of their rusted recollections, had been talking about things that had happened sixty, seventy, even eighty years before. I thought about this, and burst out laughing. Then I went home and wrote the book.

What Mendelsohn discovers is that memory is an incredibly tricky thing that is deeply rooted in our perceptions. Both he and his brother had valid memories of their time in choir, but the difference in their memories (whether Matt had even been in choir or not) completely changed the 'truth' of their story. While he and his brother were asking holocaust survivors to remember events of some 60 plus years before, they were having trouble with a mere 30 year time gap (the article was written and published in 2010, 32 years after either brother was in choir.) The above quote is potentially confusing because we don't know which brother is "right;" we are never told who was actually in choir in the article. What this points to, however, is anyone can reconstruct a memory, even when there is no trauma involved. Remembering whether or not you were in choir in high school is something most people think they would not forget, but as is shown here, it is completely possible that we will.

From what we know of trauma and how it affects the mind of those who have experienced it, we need to think about how it is best communicated in literature. What can we learn from reading about traumatic events? Does the detail of the flashbacks of veterans have any meaning to us if they can't connect it to a larger meaning themselves? Writing has been shown to be important for those working through PTSD because it is a medium through which they can express their feelings of the trauma they are still experiencing, and they can begin to make sense of their flashbacks and dreams. This expression, and the art form it takes (memoir) is exceptionally valuable in the way that it can broaden our understanding of war. For those of us who haven't experienced trauma, and even for those who have, this next step of sorting out the trauma, the coming to terms with it is the part that is useful. We can learn through the drawn conclusions that link to a larger meaning, a larger truth.

Narratives of War and their perceptions in the US: The Popular War Story Deconstructed

Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.

~ Tim O'Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home

Vietnam undoubtedly had an impact on the soldiers who served active duty there that was different from the impact previous wars had on American soldiers. One of the ways in which we can see this difference is in the overwhelming amount of writing that came from the Vietnam War; for whatever reason, writing was a tool used over and over again by war veterans attempting to make sense of their experiences and share them with others. In the first sentence of his book, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in their Generation*, Philip Beidler makes this claim, "Among the most visible aftereffects of the Vietnam war is one that, at the time perhaps, might have seemed among the least expected: it turned a significant number of American participants in the experience of that war to the life of writing" adding later that the year after the war lead to "an impassioned effort at literary sense-making"(Beidler 1). Personal narratives account for a large portion of the history of the Vietnam War. Without them, we would have less information about what happened. This change in how history is presented changed the course of American literature, as well as altering the way the American public perceived war.

In another book on the literature of Vietnam, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, Beidler makes an argument that focuses on writing from the Vietnam War as the center of a creative process of national, cultural, and literary renewal(Martin 140). He argues that writers who wrote about the Vietnam War were changing the course of American literature by writing texts that could "occupy solid cultural ground once again"(Martin 142). Because of the way Vietnam was presented to the public, first person narrative accounts gained strength as cultural and historical works. Think about the work of Michael Herr, a war reporter in Vietnam. Certainly his work is a source of culture and history because he was there to report back to the United States what was happening in Vietnam. Indeed, his subsequent novel, *Dispatches*, is one of the leading literary works written on Vietnam, and it was written about his time reporting there.

Beidler is concerned with the intersection of old and new he sees in works from Vietnam, such as Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and his later work, *The Things They Carried*. Beidler calls the latter a "new masterpiece of the private confessional…literature as personal sense making and cultural revision in the largest sense"(Beidler 11). He sees the two texts working together to make new cultural myths that are necessary to the forward movement of literature in the United States. In

this sense, I agree with Beidler. *The Things They Carried* is an important text in the course of American literature that has come out of the Vietnam War. There are few other texts that so vividly capture what seems to be the essential truth of fighting in a war: complete chaos, a loss of self, and a loss of reality. The creative agency that O'Brien allows himself in the text produced a work that better expresses the emotions associated with war than his memoir, which clings to the truthful events of his time in the army. Beidler sees this agency as something that has influenced cultural understanding of the Vietnam War in American society. He says, "Their sense of profound experiential authority in the same moment allows them to make their largest meanings through the bold embrace of new strategies of imaginative invention; and thus, precisely, in the inscription out of memory into art, they become in the fullest sense the creators of cultural myth for new times and other"(Beidler 2).

While the momentum that Vietnam literature gained can be argued as helpful to the progression of American Literature as a whole, it doesn't mean that it is not problematic in any way. When looking at what memoirs written about time in Vietnam, and separating out the ones that are particularly successful, a pattern emerges. There is a sort of formula in war memoirs that become famous and are thought of as true works of literature. Generally speaking, they are written by white men. The two prominent examples I

have chosen to analyze were both written by the same white man who had a prestigious education both before and after his time in war; O'Brien graduated from Macalaster College in Minnesota and after he came back from Vietnam, pursued a Doctorate from Harvard. While he did drop out to pursue a writing career, he certainly had a very prestigious education. Another writer who wrote a memoir about his time in Vietnam, Tobias Wolff, is a very similar case. After war, he spent time getting a Masters from Stanford.

Many of these popular texts boil down essentially to the same basic plot line; a smart young man goes to Vietnam even though he is woefully unprepared for battle of any kind. As Beidler says, "O'Brien's themes from the outset have been the old ones, the fundamental ones, the great ones: discipline, honesty, integrity; understanding, acceptance, endurance"(Beidler 14). This is certainly seen in both of O'Brien's works about Vietnam; while there, he experiences a myriad of scrapes with death and watches as his colleagues fall around him while he remains mostly unharmed. There is a girl in both stories that is party fabricated and partly real that keeps the soldier going, although he knows she is not staying faithful to him or anxiously awaiting his return. He doesn't feel brave and he doesn't do anything spectacular. He merely survives the war and comes home with a heap of experiences to write about.

A common trope in personal narrative from Vietnam is the theme of corruption of innocence; it can be seen in various levels in the works I am analyzing (it is particularly present in O'Brien's work.) O'Brien actually argues that his works don't follow this formula exactly; he declares he was never innocent, saying, in an interview, "There's not an innocent stage. I didn't go to war as an innocent. I went to war knowing, at least convinced, that the Vietnam War was ill conceived and morally wrong. That was my conviction. I didn't go to war an innocent" (Herzog 100). While O'Brien claims he wasn't innocent and wide-eyed (I wasn't a Henry Fleming [*The Red Badge of Courage*]), he certainly describes a time before he was a soldier that is innocent(Herzog 100). The theme plays out like this; the narrator, a normal civilian, is torn out of his normal civilian life and thrust into a terrifying hellscape of war. This motif was so widely received because it gelled with the media coverage that citizens at home saw of Vietnam; one of devastation and despair(Rollins 429). This description is a dead ringer for the general plots I described previously.

But why exactly is this popular? The story is one seen in almost every popular war narrative portrayed by the media for a reason, and it is not necessarily because Americans like blood, gore, and violence. The American public likes war stories where the pain and terror of war reside outside of

the narrator; they describe it in abstract terms with grand beautiful prose and descriptive stories. What I mean by this is the narrators of these popular war stories show very little bodily harm in their memoirs; they are not horrifically wounded. The narrators are physically intact after their experiences in war; they have not been maimed or disfigured in any way. They are normal citizens before and after. Because they are not "othered" in any way through their texts, their stories are left to focus on emotions that are relatable to all humans, regardless of whether or not they have faced battle. Both O'Brien and Wolff write about their emotions; their fear of battle, their anxiety over the political implications of the war, their fear of death and of killing. They do not divulge much of their actual duties in war. O'Brien only talks of killing in one short story in *The Things They Carried*, and in that story he neither confirms nor denies that he is responsible for the deaths of others; he skirts around it and uses these moment as an important point about war stories, essentially he says "Of course I killed someone. I was involved in a war that was responsible for many deaths. Don't ask about it." These stories by O'Brien and Wolff make them relatable narrators; readers can understand fear and anxiety. In *Beyond Duty*, a memoir written about the Iraq war, the narrator tells stories about times when he had to make a decision that he found out was responsible for multiple civilian deaths. This confession was seen as incredibly violent and inappropriate by many readers, even though making decisions of the kind was a part of his job

in the army ("The War Memoirist's Dilemma"). The book was given dire reviews, mostly because of the nature of the stories told. What this shows is that the general American public is not ready to deviate from the typical war story.

Gender and race both play a large role in the popularity of war memoirs.[4] The American public tends to favor texts written by male authors, and on top of that, male authors that are white. This isn't surprising; we associate war with masculinity. Soldiers are predominately men, fighting is masculine; violence is too. Present in all of my primary texts are male driven narratives that show war as a struggle of masculinity. For example, one of the most common plotlines that develop in every war story is the romance with a young woman that the soldier has left home in the states. This is seen in every work that I have chosen to analyze; in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien writes home to a girl in college who isn't as attached to the relationship as he is. In *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff tells us of his crazy fiancé who ends their relationship while he is in Vietnam, through a letter. These letters hold power over the men; O'Brien especially delves into the emotional and physical weight of these letters and how they meant so much to the men who received them. This common component of war stories works to romanticize war in some

[4] In truth, they play a large role in the popularity of all literature, but that is another thesis.

small way; it makes the story more readable for the reader because there is hope of love driving the soldier while they fight. This narrative is often not present in war memoirs written by female authors, and this puts their stories at a disadvantage because it goes against the common war story narrative the general public expects and this creates a deficit of romantic tropes for female writers.

What is too bad is that there are many atypical war stories that aren't given the credit that they deserve.[5] For example, over 7,000 women served in the Vietnam War (Rollins 419). Where are their stories? They can be found, but are almost always published as collections of short stories written by women, not as their own works of memoir. This is troubling because it promotes female narratives as a sort of niche interest; the only reason you would want to read one was if you were only interested in women because of their gender and would buy a book with a bunch of women in it. When women are mentioned in popular war memoirs, it is only as girlfriends, sisters, or mothers. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien hears a story of a girlfriend who came to Vietnam to be with her boyfriend, who is a soldier.

[5] I feel that some of this is because publishers rely to heavily on the "abnormal" nature of these works and publish them as niche pieces in volumes instead of as works of literature that can stand on their own, but this simply feeds into how the American public feels about these works generally. It reads; women cannot go to war. Women cannot write. Women do not produce art about fighting. There stories only have value when grouped together

His friend, Rat Kiley, with a combination of horror and disbelief, tells the story. The girl became friends with the Green Berets who were on base and started going on missions with them. She eventually disappears into the Vietnamese forest, solidifying to the soldiers there that women do not belong in Vietnam. But, women are not the only participants of war that are marginalized. What about the soldiers of color? Their stories are also missing from the group of war memoirs that the public has elevated and celebrated as the best literature to come of the Vietnam War. While there are characters of color present in popular war memoirs, (Wolff's colleague Sergeant Benet is black) there are few narratives published by authors of color. Again, there are many reasons for this, but one that certainly cannot be ignored is that the American public responds better to authors who are neither female nor people of color, especially when the writing concerns war. The army has projected an image of the ideal American soldier, and this is one of a young white male.

One Story, two formats: Metafiction v. Memoir

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.

- Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried

If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box me up and Ship me home and *The Things They Carried* are two prominent works of literature about the Vietnam War, both by popular war author Tim O'Brien, are two different takes on the same narrative: O'Brien's story of his time served in Vietnam. O'Brien served in the Vietnam War after college, when he was drafted into the army before going to graduate school. While in Vietnam, in his foxhole, he started his first book, a memoir about his experiences in the war. *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box me up and Ship me home* was published in 1973, shortly after O'Brien finished graduate school, about four years after he came home from Vietnam. For O'Brien, however, the memoir proved to be not enough for him to express himself and he went on to write more books and short stories about his experiences in war. His most popular book to date, *The Things They Carried*, is a fictional work that is written in the form of a memoir and tells a similar story of a young man in Vietnam. But, O'Brien wrote it nearly thirty years after his time in Vietnam, and after a career full of many other fictional works that focused on the Vietnam War, such as *Going After Cacciato*, his second published work that won the National Book Award for fiction ("Too Embarrassed Not to Kill"). By comparing and contrasting both works, we have an amazing opportunity to see how an author used his own stories in

fiction, and how the general public perceived both works separately and differently.

It is important to point out that *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was O'Brien's first published book. While it won him acclaim, it did not win any prestigious awards like much of his later work. For example, his next published work, *Going After Cacciato*, a fictional novel about the Vietnam War, won the National Book Award. *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* did put him on the map as a writer, and many critics acknowledged him as one of the best writers on Vietnam. In contrast, *The Things They Carried* won multiple awards, including the Prix Du Meilleur Livre Etranger award, as well as being a finalist for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

Both of the stories follow the same general plot; the main character, Tim O'Brien (the author, even in the work of fiction) is drafted by the army and sent to fight in the Vietnam War. He takes us through the daily life of a soldier, in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* quite literally in a first person narrative and in *The Things They Carried* through his own stories and the stories of others. Both end with him coming home from Vietnam relatively unscathed. The 'ultimate goal' of each work, however, and

the way in which each work accomplishes that ultimate goal are very different.

What is remarkable about reading the two books in succession is how we can see many similarities between the two, and perhaps the beginnings of *The Things They Carried* in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. The differences between the two works, however, illuminate how creativity and a different reading of truth leave the reader with very different experiences. For example, in one of the very first chapters of *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, O'Brien mentions, "I thought a little about Canada. I thought about refusing to carry a rifle" and again, in another chapter describes how he plotted an escape. In *The Things They Carried*, the story becomes entirely different, the line reading "At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada"(O'Brien 42). In both works, he tells a story in detail, and both stories focus around the idea of escaping war, of running away. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, we get the 'true' story. (The real story) O'Brien tells us honestly how he planned an escape to Sweden, how he called airports for prices and saved his money. How he spent his nights at AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) in the Tacoma library, reading through magazines for as much information on Sweden as he could find. He takes the reader through the weekend where he almost flees, up until the point where he realizes that

he cannot; “I could not run. I went into the hallway and bought a Coke. When I finished it I felt better, clearer-headed, and burned the plans. I was a coward. I was sick”(O’Brien 68). The story is matter of fact; O’Brien tells it how it is.

In *The Things They Carried*, the story is told in a completely different way. O’Brien has the same fears about going to war and wants to run away from the situation entirely; he doesn’t want to go to the army at all, and begins thinking of ways to avoid his duty. In this version, however, his attempt at an escape comes before he is in the army, before he has seen even basic training. In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien takes off in the middle of work one day, and drives north towards Canada. He ends up in the most northern town in Minnesota, living at a motel with an old man on a river, Rainy River, where the other side is Canada. He stays there for a while, looking at the lake, boating, fishing, and doing odd chores for the old man. The old man, Elroy, never questions O’Brien as to why he is there, just accepts his help with the chores. O’Brien makes it very clear, however, that Elroy knows why he is there; Elroy gives him money marked ‘emergency fund,’ and takes him out to the middle of Rainy River to fish. In the middle of the river, O’Brien confronts his fears by coming so close to escape; he knows that all he has to do is jump out of the boat and swim twenty feet to the shore

of Canada. On the boat, he battles with himself and asks the reader "what would you do?"(O'Brien 54).

In the end, the stories have the same outcome: O'Brien decides that he cannot run away from what he feels is his duty and stays in the army. The way each story is told, however, leaves the reader with a very different feeling. *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* is written like an essay, with long argumentative paragraphs in which O'Brien pours his thoughts on to the page. He even lays out the other side of the argument for us by writing the scene with the Chaplain, where the two argue about the morality of the war and what is right and wrong. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien takes a more literary approach; in some places, his prose reads like poetry. In particular, one paragraph's repetition of "I feared" and "I was afraid" in the story Rainy River shows more neurotic thoughts that are more deeply rooted in emotions and less in logic, which is in stark contrast to the argument O'Brien presents in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. The difference in the writing illuminates very different things in each story; in *The Things They Carried*, the story is much more focused on the emotional distress that O'Brien felt about having to fight and potentially die in a war that he did not believe in. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, the story is framed by O'Brien's political thoughts, and these are the primary reasons that he does not want to go to war, because he

believes it is morally wrong and is afraid of killing someone or being killed himself for something he does not believe in. This is shown in the move to escape; in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, O'Brien plans his exit meticulously. He knows exactly what he is doing. In *The Things They Carried*, his running is compulsive, driven by fear.

In the fictional work, O'Brien embellishes his story, taking liberties that are not technically allowed in memoir to make his story more poignant. He does it well, pulling a little more at our emotional heartstrings. For instance, the addition of the character Elroy, the old man that runs the cabin, makes the story much more poignant. By adding the elderly character that is understanding of his situation, O'Brien makes the story a much softer one, giving him a companion that understands his struggle instead of him being utterly and completely alone, as he was in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*.

What O'Brien was able to do with metafiction was combine his experiences with the creative flow of what might have happened, the fiction writers' most compelling question. By taking his experiences and reframing them in this way, he is able to give a new voice to his stories, one that is more objective than he can be recounting his own experiences himself. When asked about why he moved to writing fiction after *If I Die in a Combat Zone:*

Box Me Up and Ship Me Home was published, he said "I did not want to nail down sights and sounds anymore. I was more concerned with what might have happened"(Baldwin "Going After the War"). In *The Things They Carried*, he gets to do this in a way that closely follows his own story. What *The Things They Carried* accomplishes for the reader is that it gives a multi-leveled connection to the narrator. He himself is able to tell his story in an objective way that most memoirists cannot, and thus we can objectively judge his story in a way we can't with most memoirs. We are pulled into the story, but at the same time we are seeing it from a distance, as O'Brien is. In *The Things They Carried*, he takes many opportunities to comment on the genre of memoir, on truth and memory and war stories; "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness"(O'Brien 68). In *The Things They Carried*, he gets to make up some crazy stuff and some normal stuff so we can feel what he wants us to feel from his story. In this way, his use of metafiction is genius because he uses it to both manipulate our emotions and to raise questions we should think about every time we read a war story. Perhaps my favorite, the line that stuck with me the most, is "You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, "Is it true?" and if the answer matters, you've got your answer"(O'Brien 79).

In this quote, O'Brien is commenting on the flimsiness of truth compared to our ferocious need for it in the stories we tell and the stories we consume. Readers who are too committed to the truth can lose the point of the stories they are reading. In this case, a reader too dedicated to the truth of every story would miss the reason O'Brien wrote *The Things They Carried*, to show how war felt. His experience was rooted in his emotions, emotions that he cannot always convey with a story that is factually and chronologically "true." O'Brien wants us to be caught up in the story, in the way it makes us feel, in what it makes us think about, in how it makes us reevaluate our own lives. He doesn't want us to be caught up in the minor details of what happened exactly when; that is not the point. The point is for us to think, feel, and imagine. He wants his readers to feel connected to the story, not the truth. As he says himself, the truth is lost in war. War is crazy and chaotic and nothing makes sense. As readers, we need to realize this and reevaluate 'the point' of a war story.

While this complicates the commitment to truth that we want from all memoirs, it also puts that need for truth into focus. O'Brien's story makes us feel like we've experienced war in some small way, by showing us the chaos and emotional turmoil. Nothing is clear in *The Things They Carried*; in fact, the whole narrative seems to be draped in a layer of fog that obscures what's

true from what is not. This uncertainty, though, informs us of a larger truth; in war, you lose what is true and what is not. Thus, if you read a war story and try to parse out what is true from what is not, you are missing the point. The point isn't to tell you exactly what happened on each day of the author's duty. The point is to make you understand in some small way what they felt. "Truth" in the factual sense, doesn't really matter. Truth in the emotional sense is far more important.

O'Brien makes a profound statement with this last quote that questions why we read war memoirs. Some argue that they are works of American culture and history, that we can read them and learn from them. While this is certainly true, O'Brien is pointing to something else, however, which is that stories are powerful not only because of their truth or what they say about culture or history. Stories are powerful because we tell them and we feel we need to tell them. O'Brien's entire work, *The Things They Carried*, is a story that is told for a reason, and that reason is much different from why *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was told. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien seems to be writing for the effect on the audience, the journey of reading the story instead of a need to get the information on the page and get the book into the hands of the public who will then have an educational tool about the Vietnam war.

This is demonstrated especially well by what is perhaps the most touching story in *The Things They Carried*, Speaking of Courage. Speaking of Courage tells the story of Norman Bowker, a solider who had been in Vietnam with O'Brien. Now, after the war, he is back at home. All he does all day is drive in his father's Chevy truck in circles around the lake. He is aimless, going in circles literally and metaphorically, because he cannot assimilate to civilian life. While driving, he dwells on life before the war. He thinks about his friend Max, who drowned in the lake he is circumambulating. He thinks about Sally Kramer, his girl in high school, who had driven around the lake with him and whose picture he used to carry in his wallet. Norman imagines having conversations with them now; asking Sally what it's like to be married, talking to Max about god.

He dwells on the fact that he almost won the Silver Star for valor—almost. Even though he came home with seven medals, it is the "almost" of the Silver Star that haunts him. As he tells his father, "Well, this one time, this one night out by the river…I wasn't very brave"(O'Brien 136). What he can't seem to tell his father is that he blames himself for the death of a friend, who drowned that night in the muddy river. While he can't seem to tell it, all he thinks about is telling it; he thinks about Sally listening to his story, about this father, about Max, about the entire town. His guilt keeps him in the rut,

the circle around the lake—he can't break out of the cycle of guilt no matter how hard he tries.

In the following chapter, we learn that O'Brien conceived the story when a friend of O'Brien's (we assume Norman is modeled after this friend) writes O'Brien a letter suggesting a story:

> What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he can't ... If you want, you can use the stuff in this letter. …Something about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there— you can tell it (O'Brien 151).

This story, seen in *The Things They Carried*, is a very important example of how a fictionalized story can produce a greater truth. In Speaking of Courage, the reader is able to feel how trapped Norman feels by his driving in circles around the lake. The lake signifies Vietnam in his mind; his driving in circles around it shows how he is still wrestling with the aftermath of his experiences. Even though the story isn't factually true, it speaks to a larger truth by showing how it feels to come back from war. Without this story, *The Things They Carried* would have been missing the 'after' as much of the text deals with O'Brien's time in Vietnam. The 'after' is important because that is when trauma is realized. In Speaking of Courage, we are given an impression of trauma after we have seen the traumatic events of the chaos in Vietnam.

Conclusion

You add things up. You lost a friend to the war, and you gained a friend. You compromised one principle and fulfilled another. You learned, as old men tell it in front of the courthouse, that war is not all bad; it may not make a man of you, but it teaches you that manhood is not something to scoff; some stories of valor are true; dead bodies are heavy, and it's better not to touch them; fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die, all limbs functioning and heart thumping and charging and having your chest torn open for all the work; you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. You learned that the old men had lives of their own and that they valued them enough to try not to lose them; anyone can die in a war if he tries.

- Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried

Conflict defines our world. This is simple and lasting; history shows us how this has happened and how it will most likely continue. If there weren't conflict, however, there might not be the same commitment to stories that we see in societies and cultures around the world. The two are definitely linked in a "which came first, the chicken or the egg" sort of way. It is hard to imagine a world where one exists without the other.

In the above quote, O'Brien shows how he has made sense of the war and how it has left a lasting influence on him. He shows that while war takes a lot away from soldiers, countries, families, and civilians, it also leaves them with an experience that will stay with them forever. He learned from his experience; it shaped him in a way that he will never forget or be able to undo. It reminds us that the act of reading his book is a parallel; we get through the tough, emotional, sad, and scary parts to emerge with a new lesson in mind. We struggle through the death and destruction because we

know at the end Tim O'Brien makes it out of Vietnam alive; the act of reading reminds us that the act of writing this book is an act of survival. We can make it through to the end because we know the ultimate outcome; we are holding it in our hands.

This is why memoir is uniquely important; every memoir is an act of survival. The stories, no matter how dire, begin and end with the knowledge that the author has survived to write about their experiences. . The knowledge of survival makes the reading of trauma bearable; yet, we still feel all the horror of the story and worry about the outcome. It is impossible to not come full circle as a reader. It is also impossible to leave a memoir unaffected by it; like the author, we carry the experience of reading memoirs forward into our lives.

O'Brien signifies this in his last scene of *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. He describes his leaving Vietnam, flying back to the states, eating a steak, getting a good night's sleep. The final scene of the book ends with him putting on his civilian clothes to finally go home to his family. He realizes that he doesn't have civilian shoes, and, although he doesn't want to, he has to wear his combat boots. Even though he knows no one will notice them, he wishes he could leave them behind. If we want to be symbolic, the shoes represent his time in Vietnam. He can't leave it behind

because it has changed him, yet no one will notice the change. As the last line of the memoir points out, "It's impossible to go home barefoot"(O'Brien 209).

The memoir is one example of stories that have come out of this symbiotic relationship of conflict and story. Over time, the genre has developed from being a strict, factual recounting of a person's life to the powerhouse genre it is today. As our understanding of memory has grown, the way memoir is written has evolved as well. A different reading of truth, the larger and more accepting reading that I have proposed, is absolutely essential for a full understanding of memoir. As an art form, memoir is held to an impossible standard of "truth" and this standard, which is unique to memoir and does not affect other forms of art, limits what we can gain from reading memoirs. If we accept the larger truth I have proposed, we will be able to appreciate memoirs for their effect and the dimensions these effects add to our understanding of life.

This is especially important when we read stories of trauma that we did not experience or cannot relate to any events in our own lives, which is the case for most people who read war memoirs. As seen in *The Things They Carried*, stories that did not actually happen may communicate a larger and more important truth than a story that did actually happen ever could. When we are thinking about war and hoping to gain an insight into the experience

of a soldier, we need to think about what this actually means. We must remember that unless we enlist in the military and go off to fight in a combat zone we cannot actually gain a full truth of what the chaos of war means. Even if we did, war is a unique experience; we cannot replicate Vietnam. Through these memoirs, however, what we can gain is an understanding, an impression, a sense, of what it means to experience war. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien gives us a "true" understanding of the experience of war; he writes an emotional truth of his experience, we share his confusion, his pain, and his anger. If we don't reframe the way we think of truth, we would completely miss these story-truths because we would be too caught up in facts and figures to fully realize them. Yet, if you speak to any veteran about their experiences, they won't tell you facts and figures. Those facts and figures aren't important to them, they aren't the truth they have of war, and are not the truth they would want you to glean of their experience in war. What matters is the larger truth; the feelings, the emotions, the pain, anger, and dreams they have from their experiences in war.

That is what we can learn from literature that we cannot learn from history books or newspapers. This is extremely important to history, culture and society because it gives us a multi-dimensional view of our history, which then influences our culture in society. For the Vietnam War, the influence of the outpouring of personal narratives and memoirs has

influenced the way the American public perceives soldiers and the way we think about war. When we learn more than facts and figures, then we can gain a larger truth about war. This larger truth helps us then finally perceive war in an even more informed way as a culture and a society. Then, we can take that truth forward with as, because, as O'Brien says, it *is* impossible to go home barefoot.

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