

# *The Postmodern Narrative Techniques in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"*

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**Abstract:** The Vietnam War had an irreversible negative impact on the United States, Vietnam, and the world at large. Its effects extended beyond geopolitics and seeped into the domain of literature, where numerous works have profoundly depicted and contemplated the conflict. Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" stands as a prime example of such literature, set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's theory of postmodern metanarratives, this paper examines how O'Brien employs postmodern narrative techniques that diverge from traditional grand narratives to articulate the essence of his war fiction. Upon analysis, the paper contends that Tim O'Brien adopts the narrative mode of metafiction, blending narrative and commentary texts alongside real and fictive elements. By doing so, he seeks to alert readers to the constructed nature of both the textual and real worlds, encouraging them to perceive war through the lens of individuals' traumatic war experiences.

**Keywords:** Postmodern narrative, Metafiction, War narrative, Tim O'Brien

## 1. Introduction

Tim O'Brien is a famous contemporary American writer who writes about the Vietnam War. His personal experience of involvement in the Vietnam War provides rich material for his literary creation. He uses many postmodern techniques to reproduce the American social picture of the Vietnam War and the effects of the war on American soldiers. *The Things They Carried* is his semi-autobiographical novel, composed of multiple Vietnam War stories. O'Brien uses a discontinuous, fragmentary metafictional text to reveal the violence and absurdity of the Vietnam War to readers in writing. The work received many literary honors following its publication in 1990.

In *The Things They Carried*, "How to Tell a True War Story" is a well-characterized and thought-provoking short story. O'Brien outlines the soldiers' journey toward death in a war environment with despair and confusion through extremely personal narrative techniques and rich language expressions. O'Brien disrupts the chronological order and uses a metafictional narrative technique to intertwine the same stories throughout the novel, interpreting the Vietnam War and highlighting individual qualities through a combination of reality, memory, and imagination. This mode of war narrative is unusual and different from the traditional narrative. The metanarrative, also known as grand narrative, is a widely respected traditional narrative model in modern society. It is a complete vision, a type of conceptualization of the process of human historical development that has a beginning and an end[1].

Metanarrative is an all-encompassing narrative pattern with coherence and unity. The narrative style of "How to Tell a True War Story" differs from conventional metanarratives and even subverts this narrative style. Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French literary theorist and philosopher, argues that metanarratives constitute a major part of social modernity, and postmodernism is characterized by the scepticism of metanarratives [1]. With the rise of the postmodern era, people have questioned traditional ways of conveying stories and history. Today's social phenomena also reflect the postmodern idea that past meta-narratives have become increasingly incapable of conveying traditional morals, values, authority, beliefs, and faith systems.

This study will demonstrate O'Brien's rejection of the traditional metanarrative and summarize his creative intent by analyzing the unique postmodern narrative features in "How to Tell a True War Story". The paper will first elaborate on and explain some definitions, such as Lyotard's theory of postmodern metanarrative. Then, it will explore O'Brien's creative purpose by analyzing specific texts to find evidence that proves the traces of fiction in the narrative process, the absurdity of the story itself, and the importance of personal traumatic experiences of war.

## 2. Key Definitions

From the late 1950s to the present, there has been a never-ending debate about postmodern creativity. The two world wars and the various ugly manifestations of capitalism in its struggle for world rights have caused many scholars to distrust the concepts of enlightenment and historical progress. It is with scepticism and reflection that Lyotard examines modernity. According to Lyotard, the truth of modernity is terror and despotism. As the circumstances of the times change, when the metanarrative is generally viewed with suspicion by the public, several smaller narratives can come together and replace the original grand narrative, creating a new identity for the times. Therefore, Lyotard defines postmodernism in the preface to *The Postmodern Condition*: "I might call the skepticism of metanarratives' postmodern" [1].

Postmodernity challenges traditional beliefs, norms, and authority. This challenge has led postmodernity to constantly transcend itself and express itself in new ways. To some extent, Postmodern narratives are not a recounting of a new era but rather a "rewriting of some of the features represented by modernity" [2]. Postmodern narrative texts have subverted the definition of the nature and function of art in traditional humanist concepts, bridging the gap between elite and popular culture.

Metafiction is very representative of postmodern narratives. It is the dominant narrative genre in the postmodern narrative paradigm in the United States. The broad meaning of metafiction is fiction about writing fiction. Metafiction questions the relationship between fiction and reality. This type of novel usually uses a dialogue between the narrator and the imagined reader to intersperse the process of creating the novel between the narratives. "How to Tell a True War Story" is both a story and an exploration of how stories are told. O'Brien goes to the source of the novel's creation, repeatedly exploring what a true war story should look like and teaching readers the principles of telling a true war story. Therefore, "How to Tell a True War Story" is a typical Metafiction text.

## 3. The Metafictional Narrative Model

### 3.1. Patterns of intersecting narrative and commentary

Throughout the novel, the narrator guides readers through various storytelling techniques: at times, by simply summarizing events; at others, by departing from realism to depict the soldiers' imaginings; and still at other times, by offering commentary on the source materials or his own writing. The exposition of comments placed in the narrative passages of the novel is functional and not part of the narrative content. However, these comments are intended to remind the reader of the traces of fabrication in the narrative process and the absurdity of the story itself. O'Brien draws attention to the

fact that his writing is constructed and the process involved in creating it [3]. He creates a fresh and original war narrative while also providing a great example of how to tell a true war story.

In the text, Lemon's death leaves Bob Kiley, who has lost his best friend, to painfully write to Lemon's sister, telling her the death of her brave brother. Kiley carefully completed the letter and mailed it but did not hear back from Lemon's sister. As a 19-year-old boy, he cannot accept this because he feels that Lemon's sister should have replied to the news of her brother's death and poured out her grief with Kiley, who was both the letter writer and her brother's best friend. Kiley ascribes the sister's silence to her indifferent and uncaring nature[4]. Therefore, Kiley's description of Lemon's sister as "dumb cooze." For Kiley, Lemon's death is so palpable that it instills fear and even triggers a stress response.

Regarding Lemon's death, different characters in the story produce different reactions. Kiley shows impulsiveness over the death of his best friend. Lemon's sister responds to her brother's death with silence. These two characters' reactions to the same thing in the war can demonstrate O'Brien's commentary that "A true war story is never moral"[5]. War destroys morality, so when telling a war story, the moral part seems false instead. Tim O'Brien is not trying to suggest that these individuals lack morals; rather, he aims to convey that the war has inflicted lasting damage upon their moral framework.

Another story about Kiley is that he went crazy and shot a baby buffalo he met in the mountains with his gun after Lemon's death. Kiley's killing of innocents gives the reader an ugly look at him. However, readers tend to be skeptical of Kelly's killing of the baby buffalo because it is absurd. It seems as though O'Brien intentionally tells the reader that the story did not occur and that he fabricated it. Indeed, regardless of how absurd the tale may be, it does not hinder the reader's capacity to grasp the intended message the author seeks to impart. These fictitious and outlandish narratives frequently come closer to the reality of war. The double mental and physical collapse that the Vietnam War brought to its victims is exactly the truth. It may be the cause of narrator O'Brien's comment that "A true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly"[5].

Tim O'Brien skillfully juxtaposes narrative discourse with critical discourse. This approach can help readers examine the possible fictionalization of the external world of this literary work. He uses this postmodern metafictional narrative technique to reveal the alienation of postmodern society, proving that it is no longer adapted to the traditional meta-narrative that represents modern experience while revealing the novel's creative thrust.

### 3.2. Blurring of Fiction and Truth

In the preface of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien acknowledges that "The book is a work of fiction"[6]. All of the situations and characters are made up, with the exception of a few specifics pertaining to the author's personal life. O'Brien also lived through the Vietnam War. Therefore, when he writes about the history of the Vietnam War, he not only tries to faithfully "record" it but also supplements it with his memories, and tries to gain insight into the "real" history and memories of the Vietnam War in the minds of other soldiers. O'Brien explores the ways in which people convey their experiences to themselves and to others via language, imagination, and recollection [7].

In "How to Tell a True War Story", Tim O'Brien blurs the lines between truth and fiction by giving the narrator his own name and naming some of his characters after the guys he genuinely served beside in the Vietnam War. He is both the narrator and protagonist of "How to Tell a True War Story". In addition to the name, O'Brien takes on a few of his own traits to flesh out the narrator's history and character. Although there are certain distinctions, readers will discover that the author and narrator's life share a lot in common. By incorporating so many true details from his own life into what he describes as "merely fiction," he confounds the reader and presents a challenge. As readers follow the narrator, O'Brien, to the Vietnam War, they share his doubts, fears, guilt, and curiosities, which

heightens their emotional reaction. In this way, O'Brien wants to remind readers that empathic responses in storytelling are more crucial than the objective truth of the war story.

In the story, a patrol of six men on listening post duty in the mountains hears all sorts of strange noises in the valley. They dismissed the sound as the music of an Asian rock band, as an excellent soprano. Even if those sounds were not made by the enemy, they eventually got on the radio and demanded that the mountains be burned and destroyed. They fought back against a non-existent enemy with over \$100,000 in weapons. This narrative text offers a highly imaginative and exaggerated account of the voices heard by the six soldiers, adopting an unreal narrative style. These visions ultimately undermine the soldiers' sense of reality since their imagination has such a powerful hold on them. Then, their schizophrenic craziness erodes their tranquil selves [8]. It reflects the brutality and unfeeling of war and hints at the changing mentality of soldiers in a war situation. O'Brien uses fictionalized narrative content to tell the truth about what the war reflected. This corresponds to the comment of the narrator in the text - that there are always fictional elements in the stories told that make them seem less real, when in fact these imaginative parts are the conclusive truth [5].

For O'Brien's war literature, it no longer matters whether the story is true or not, but rather what the narrator or creator really felt when he "copied" the memories. While readers may focus on the factual reality of the novel's narrative, O'Brien focuses on the emotional reality of the narrative. In order to accurately depict the nature of the conflict and demonstrate the extent to which it affected those soldiers, O'Brien should blur the lines between fact and fiction. Most importantly, he aims to evoke in readers a sense of the emotions experienced by the soldiers during the war. As both a witness to and a victim of this tragic history, Tim O'Brien possesses a deep understanding of the American troops' mindsets. This allows him to analyze the nature of the Vietnam War and offer insights into their inner worlds, thus deepening the exploration of his war novel themes.

#### 4. Discussions

In "How to Tell a True War Story," Tim O'Brien uses the narrative mode of metafiction, combining narrative and commentary texts, as well as real and fictional elements, to effectively engage the reader in the construction of the work's meaning. He intentionally avoids following a traditional linear narrative in his work to tell the story. The novel is narrated in fragments so that the complete story is fragmented and interspersed with comments beyond the story. The narrator character in the work will tell the story of the war and reflect on the narrative. Moreover, O'Brien incorporates interactive elements into his work to challenge the expectation of passive reader reception in traditional metanarratives. He allows readers to think more actively about the meaning and truth of war.

However, some scholars, represented by Jim Neilson, argue that O'Brien did not succeed in recreating the Vietnam War because O'Brien mystified the war. To interpretive, mystification is an aesthetic device. As Jim Neilson has commented, "It is just a new kind of aestheticism, a trust in the power of storytelling and the literary imagination"[9]. He argues that O'Brien's postmodernist narrative techniques may aestheticize the suffering, thereby obscuring the real trauma experienced by the narrator in the war. However, such an explanation would neglect the relationship between the work's metafictional features and story content. The paper wants to use an example to support her primary argument. A very important role of metafiction is to illustrate "the novelist's intent"[10]. Regarding Curt Lemon's death, O'Brien fabricates a game of catch involving a smoke grenade. He crafts a distinctive image juxtaposing shade and sunlight, and suggests that Lemon's last thought was that it was the sunlight that claimed his life. For O'Brien, it almost doesn't matter whether some of the suffering was genuine or imagined. What O'Brien truly aims to evoke in the reader is emotional compassion for the casualties of war, rather than simply conveying their anguish. As a writer, he needs to avoid making his work frightening to his readers. Therefore, he uses some special

descriptions and humorous imagery to "diffuse horror"[11], which means to allow readers to understand the true nature of war in a more acceptable and relaxed manner. Moreover, as argued above, O'Brien wants to convey to his readers through his creation the emotional truth of the war story rather than the factual truth of the narrative. O'Brien does not aestheticize the suffering or obscure for readers the truth that the narrators have experienced in the war; on the contrary, he uses an innovative narrative mode to make the reader naturally accept the brutal reality and shorten a distancing effect between soldier's trauma and readers. Much of O'Brien's work is presented as fiction, but upon reading it, the readers may be left with a profound sense of the strong authenticity at the core of the work. This feature of creation is recognized by many people. For example, the Hartford Courant notes that O'Brien had accurately portrayed one of the most persuasive writings on the subject of war, and the St. Louis newspaper comments that it was hard to read a book so true to life [6]. O'Brien fruitfully enchants the minds of both the writer and the reader through his unique narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

Combined with Lyotard's theory of postmodern metanarratives, this paper analyzes the narrative techniques with postmodern characteristics in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," which the author summarizes as the metafictional narrative mode. The author argues that Tim O'Brien's postmodern metafictional narrative technique is an innovative narrative mode that subverts the traditional metanarrative. Through these narrative techniques, he reminds the reader to screen the fictional text and external reality to determine the presence of falsehood. More importantly, O'Brien emphasizes understanding war through the individual's traumatic experience of war rather than relying on grand historical narratives. Only when the readers truly understand the pain within the narrator and the victims of war can they go on to truly reflect on the causes of war rather than keep avoiding and forgetting about it.

Through analyzing Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of O'Brien's work. On this basis, the essay also delves into novel postmodern narrative modes that aid readers in interpreting war texts more effectively. Despite this, the author solely examines one of O'Brien's narrative works, specifically 'How to Tell a True War Story,' thereby limiting the scope of the conclusions drawn. The interpretation of Tim O'Brien's postmodern narrative writing techniques and war-themed works can be combined with more of O'Brien's other works to make more comprehensive perspectives and diverse conclusions. Meanwhile, a comparative analysis in conjunction with other different postmodern narrative texts is necessary, which will help to explore richer pairs of postmodern writing modes.

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