

# (Re)Presenting War: A Study of Resilience in Tim O' Brien's The Things They Carried

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## Abstract

War has registered itself as an inseparable reality of modern times. However, it has marked its presence since the inception of human civilization, and so have the narratives centring it. An investigation into the traditional mainstream narratives divulge the repeated construction of lofty perceptions around war. Per contra to the representation, there have been stories from the battlefield that have created cervix in the narration. Modern times, with the increasing number and intensity of war, resulted in the increase in aberrations in the traditional presentation and brought forth the not-so-glorious-and-glamorous aspects that had been shoved under the carpet by the authors. Tim O' Brien, in his collection *The Things They Carried*, touches upon his own experiences and those of a few others during the Vietnam War. He presents the stories as fictional accounts and still manages to give words to the "unspeakable." As an addition to the conventional presentation of wounds as physical, Brien and various other authors of modern times delve into exploring the emotional and psychological damage as well, that, no doubt, leaves indelible prints while on the field and clings on to some beyond war too.

The research paper attempts to delve into exploring the role of resilience in veterans combatting the lone war in the midst of expectations that the traditional war narratives have given birth to. Through this, the paper also strives to locate truth in the portrayal of war.

**Keywords:** War, Resilience, Representation

Since the inception of life on earth, destiny has imposed various challenges to human beings who have confronted and braved those challenges time and again. Continuous exposure to conflicts raised the bar of risk-taking, thus, strengthening the basic human instinct to survive. It, then, gave space to numerous attempts, owing to Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest," which, in turn, often resulted in violence. When violence transgresses from the space of individual ideologies into the arena of larger population, it takes the mould of war. Man has been living through the grossest forms of violence and still managed to survive. Literature has always had a fascination with the brutalities that the turbulent times bring. Since antiquity, words like honour, chivalry, etc. have traced their repeated usage in the narrations about the most turbulent times of all: war. *Aenied*, the great epic, opens with "Arms, and the man I sing," and so do numerous other works that succeed it. The virtues of honour, heroism, chivalry, etc. were exemplified and hailed as in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier":

If I should die, think this of me:  
That there's some corner of foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

While such self-sacrificial expressions of pride and honour in martyrdom continued to be written, the dawn of the twentieth century saw the spark being mellowed down. With the onset of wars across the globe the hurt sentiment gave space to the ‘othered’ aspect of war, i.e., the agony that war brings to the soldiers who participate in it. To highlight and condemn the heroic frame related to war and its representation, and as a protest against the political will to end World War I Siegfried Sassoon wrote a letter titled “A Soldier’s Declaration”:

.... On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them. Also, I believe that it may help to destroy callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize. (net.lib.byu.edu)

In the midst of the galvanized representation of war, such voices of dissent against the traditional narratives created aberrations and, in the process, brought forth the aspects that had remained marginalized. The agony faced by the soldiers at the war front had faced neglect for a considerably lengthy period in the literary register. It is no new wisdom that the agonized “self” continuously strives to find ways to bear the brunt in order to survive. This survival is a result of resilience, a factor which promotes sanity and well-being during stressful conditions. Resilience becomes all the more important under wartime conditions as life-threatening situations often confront the dilemma that germinate out of the existing glorious representations of war and the on-ground grim reality.

Tim O’ Brien’s *The Things They Carried* is one such work that brings to the fore the confrontation that poses a direct threat to the need and want of resilience among the combatants. It is a collection of experiences and memories—of self and of others—real and not so real— interwoven in the form of short stories. Tim O’ Brien makes it a point to let his readers know of the flip side of the glorious and chivalrous aspects related to war that generations have grown up believing and nurturing their faith in. His drawing the stories from his personal experience in the Vietnam War establishes responsibility of truth on his shoulders that he shares with his namesake narrator and protagonist who with him has the authority to communicate the stories to the readers. The authority is shared with some other characters and an omniscient third person too. It not only brings different perspectives to the readers but also takes them closer to the experience by virtue of learning about more than single perspective.

To lessen the gorge between his experiences and his memory he weaves a thread of recollections that shapes the narrated events. Narration becomes a weapon for him to cope up with the pain that he lived with for years. The pain, that has its roots in the times even before his becoming an active participant in the war, as he apathetically took part in as a young man scared of being shamed at not participating in the war, finds an outlet in the stories of the middle- aged guilt-ridden war veteran.

The irony of this communication lies in the fact that while O’Brien is able to give vent to his grief, there are many others whose pain goes unregistered in any form—oral or written. Norman Bowker, after years past the war still cannot manage to talk of the times when he was brave and also of those when he was not. His story comes to us through a third person that highlights Bowker’s inability to come out of the brackets of silence that must explode to narrate the realities of war to the world. Repeated use of expressions like “would have”, “might have” in his imagined conversations with his father in “Speaking

of Courage” embody the longing caused by memories that could not be managed to pass on to someone else:

“Hey, loosen up,” the voice said. “What you really need, friend?”

Norman Bowker smiled.

“Well,” he said, “how’d you like to hear about--”

He stopped and shook his head.

“Hear what, man?”

“Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. All done.” (171)

This conversation was with no imaginary person, but his faith in a civilian’s indiscernibility of the truths of war subdued his long held desire to give vent to his emotions. However, standing true to the ideal of a soldier never giving up, Bowker gives in his all in order to give voice to his emotions as is evident from the seventeen page letter in which he jumped "from self-pity to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference" (150). Finding himself impuissant at articulating the experience and the emotions brought therefrom, he eventually asks O’ Brien to ink them. In addition, the Vietnam experience that was too important to be kept to oneself, he also was aware of the ignorance of those who were not a part of the war, as the narrator informs, “The town could not talk, and would not listen. ‘How’d you like to hear about the war?’ he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug” (163). The statement brings forth two opposite dynamics. On the one hand hangs the veterans’ will to talk and, thus, give words to the "unspeakable" that the warfront serves on the platter; while on the other lies the collective amnesia that falls upon the society. The apparent collective amnesia generates a feeling of absolute non- interest in the public for the soldier that, in turn, deters him from speaking to even the possible listeners about what might have been instrumental in relieving him of the burden—the burden of grief, of guilt, of suffering and of loss. Bowker carried with him the grief of having lost his friend(s), the guilt of not being able to save him, and that of having killed the men who he never personally knew, the suffering caused by his inability to talk of the gory times, and the loss of his innocent youthful self that was engulfed by the war.

The burden assumes a larger role as it affects, not only Bowker, but also his fellow soldiers who along with the necessary physical loads of arms and ammunitions carried emotional loads too. The large stature of Henry Dobbins carries extra rations as the physical burden and, more importantly, the emotional baggage of his girlfriend’s pantyhose that he believes is a good luck charm to him. Ted Lavender’s nervousness forces him to carry marijuana and tranquilizers, while Kiowa’s religiosity gives him *The Bible* to carry to the battleground. Carrying of these and other mundane things as candies and photos emphasizes their humaneness that gets weighed down under tangible and intangible things, ideas and memories.

The chaotic outer surroundings reflect in the chaos within. Jimmy Cross verdicts himself guilty of Ted Lavender’s death. When Lavender was shot in the head, Cross was fantasizing about his coveted friend, Martha, who used to write poems to him in letters signed “Love, Martha” but neither meaning that “love” nor talking of his life at the moment in the midst of war. It confuses Cross’ young mind. His burning of her letters as a result of guilt brings to light the harsh effects of responsibilities laden

on the shoulders not yet strong enough to handle them. It also brings to the fore the necessity for young minds to balance the tension between the beautiful fantasies and harsh realities. Cross was first obsessed with thoughts about Martha, and later with the forceful self-implicated guilt at Lavender's death. These obsessions of his reflect on the extent of how irreparably damaging these confusions might be for young minds to bear.

The chaos all around diminishes their discerning faculty that distinguishes between right and wrong, necessary and unnecessary and, avoidable and unavoidable. The perspectives that they might have nurtured regarding the rationalization of killing and being killed before the war get shattered with the new knowledge about their own world. Rat Kiley's shooting the baby VC water buffalo carries with it a hard-hitting realization about the attempts made by chaos to bring to us realization of the inconsistencies of life in the form of actions that make no rational sense. Kiowa's death, having been shot dead while taking a pee, too, ditches the long-held perspectives by the readers about men on the field. His death is far from the general idea of being martyred and dies an 'undignified' death that does not cater to our idea of gallantry. He becomes one of the innumerable casualties of war, who could not share anything with anyone other than being an addition to the statistics as represented in Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" wherein the soldier is no more than number "JS/07 M378." The inclusion in statistics rips off, not only the soldiers' human identity, but also their right to voice their individual stories, as they then become a part of the larger collective where some experiences are deleted, many ignored and a few added. The added stories are built not on fantasies but have their base in the collective experiences of the troops, who then, if unable to speak for themselves, search for solace in the collective narrative that, contrary to the world, they try identifying with, as their individual experiences, as Terry Eagleton says, "We are woven through by the meanings of others—meanings which we never got to choose, yet which provide the matrix within which we come to make sense of ourselves and the world" (76).

The inability to communicate their experiences renders in them a hollowness that is no less destructive than the ammunitions that they face and dodge. This hollowness affects them emotionally and psychologically. Mitchell Sanders in "How to Tell a True War Story" tells about the soldiers who go so paranoid that the sound of patrol leads them into imagining strange ghostly noises. Imagination takes no time to take over a mind full of silences. These silences trace their origin not only in the inability to communicate but also of the social structure that builds its glorious pyramids on misguided expectations from the boots on the battleground. The "fog" between the social construct of "glory" and the military experiences of war creates a wall of fear—fear of shame, which, in turn, leads them to engage in absurd actions that if infer favourably are hailed as "valorous", and if against then as "coward." Thus, the fine line between valor and mindlessness is decided based not on the situation but on the end result that might go any direction. This puts the soldiers under stress to look and act valiant enough that when revisited later, the experiences sound gloriously courageous and fearless. Thus, the stress of war, the tender age of the young soldiers and the perplexing mysteries of a new land club themselves to haunt them and aggravate their risk-taking intentions. "The Things They Carried" dauntingly explains this phenomenon in the following words:

They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment." (20)

It raises questions as to what is the final truth then—the glamorous stories of glory that have been passed on to us through centuries or the ones that are coming straight out of the present-day horse's mouth. In "How to Tell a True War Story" O'Brien shatters the idea of truth about war in stories. He does this by mentioning in the Preface that all the characters are fictional, but then he also dedicates his work to Norman Bowker and the Alpha Company that are the characters. Thus, by blurring the lines between fact and fiction he lays out the dark truth that some things are beyond explanation and comprehension, as facts and fantasies both fail to do justice to the experience. Alongside, claims like, "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever" (65) pose questions at the narrative that has been set since ages-- the narrative that celebrates war and sings songs in its glory. It vehemently brings in the dock the legacy that writers of war have established through their repeated glorious and glamorous representation of the gory truth.

The struggle to trace one's "voice" explores the inner recesses that contain the horrors committed by others and by self, courage, brilliance, cowardice, faint-heartedness and negligence, and put on the table the stark-naked truth as mentioned by Brien, "As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (66). The truth be put forth with no machinery to edit or manufacture false emotions in the readers, and leave space for them to ponder if the glories attached are worth the loss incurred. Resilience, thus, is not an extension of the on-field glory alone but also of the struggle afterwards when the battle to have a clearer view of ideas, morality and emotions in respect to self, as it is aimed against two seminal defining parts of their lives: their own trauma and the societal expectation of glory. In the process of doing so, Brien's stories create an alternative narrative, on that is not represented either by the victor or the vanquished, but by the 'othered' in the entire construct of war and literature, i.e., the soldier. David Taras quotes Brian McKenna whose statement on Senate hearings related to valour and horror in war reflects on the significance of settlement within oneself in "The Struggle over 'The Valour and the Horror': Media Power and the Portrayal of War": "They are about history and who gets to tell it. They are about truth, and who gets to interpret it. But most of all, they are about pain and who gets to speak about it." The statement, thus, takes one away from the propagated truth to the fact that irrespective of the victor's or the vanquished's perspective, the soldiers' plight remains the same. Consequently, if there are any foundational narratives, as Culler, uses the term, then these are the ones that give "voice" to the "unspeakable" and question the conventional representation.

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