

A Metanarrative Analysis in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"

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ABSTRACT

In the context of a series of large-scale wars occurring in the 20s and early 21st century, Tim O'Brien's short story "How to Tell a True War Story" is set in the background of the controversial Vietnam War. While war narratives are often subject to imposing an authoritative, institutional truth, O'Brien refuses to follow this traditional way of representation. Through the lens of Jean-Francois Lyotard's Postmodern Condition, this essay analyzes how, opposite to the grand narrative, his unconventionally fragmented narrative interrogates the notion of 'truth' in the war narrative. This fragmentation is an intentional gesture to capture the traumatic experiences of individuals that have long been neglected by the historical metanarrative. Highlighting O'Brien's emphasis on individuality and subjective experience, the essay aims to locate his work as a typical postmodern fiction, shedding light on the new way of representing wars and the conception of wars and trauma.

Keywords: *postmodern narrative, war narrative, traumatic experience, truth.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tim O'Brien's narrative in "How to Tell a True War Story" does not appear to conform to the traditional pattern of war representation. Instead, it is full of chronologically fragmented and highly personalized accounts of the war trauma, playing with the conventional conception of the "truth" even in the title. "What is the war all about? ... What do you kill for? What do you die for?" [1] The questions call to interrogate the meaning, the legitimacy, and even the value of wars that have been greatly propagated by the official narrative.

This act of questioning can be seen as a close correspondence to Jean-Francois Lyotard's understanding of postmodern narrative, which invites our reading through the lens of his theory when reading O'Brien's eccentric short story. To Lyotard, postmodern is the "incredulity toward metanarrative" [2]. By "metanarrative", as he has explained, Lyotard refers to the grand narrative that is used to legitimize certain knowledge as a universal and institutional truth. Lyotard's claim of postmodern narrative in the sense that problematizes the conventional metanarrative has indeed turned the rhetorical function of the narrative away from conveying a certain universal or political truth to representing a sense of heterogeneity and openness

This essay will argue that the fragmented narrative features found in "How to Tell a True War Story" are

intentionally set to deny the historical metanarrative by shifting the emphasis from asserting undisputed cultural truth to attempting to represent the individual traumatic experience. It will first apply the narratological and trauma-study reading of Lyotard to have an understanding of O'Brien's purpose lying behind his narrative gestures. Then, by applying the theory in textual analysis, it will focus detailly on those gestures, including the altering narrators and non-linear chronological narration, in order to interpret how the traumatic experience is highlighted in O'Brien's representation as opposed to the traditional one, eventually interrogating the notion of truth in the war representation itself.

2. A TRAUMATIC TRUTH OF THE WAR

How exactly does Tim O'Brien's short story problematize the conventional way of narrating the war? To answer the question, it is necessary to solidify an understanding of the established war narrative itself in the first place, or even, the narrative itself, especially its rhetorical power. While the exact definition of narrative still remains controversial and has been widely argued by various narratologists like Paul Ricoeur or Peter Brooks throughout history, a certain census is still achieved on the narrative basic prototype, which is "the representation of an event or of a sequence of events" [3], to put it simply, with meanings and the narrative agents. This definition implies that narrative actually allows a certain

meaning to be formed and conveyed to the audience through building a causal relationship between a series of events, which is its rhetorical function.

Such rhetorical function, or, the meaning-building of the narrative, is especially emphasized in the story-telling of warfare, where the political and ideological aspects come into play. In regard to that, Tone Kvernbekk has concluded the function of the war narrative to mainly justify and call for the public's support of the legitimized military action [4]. At the first glance, her argument may seem only applicable to the national level narrative. Nevertheless, the personal account of war can also be influenced by national propaganda, turning from representing a private memory to constructing a hero-like figure that corresponds with the desire for a nation's faith-building before, during, and after the war through the conscious act of narration.

This tendency can be easily observed in a rather infamous personal narrative of the American Civil War, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Published in 1895, it tells a story of a normal farm boy who overcomes his fear and is matured through his war experience, eventually transforming into an honorable man. The naturalist depiction of the battlefield and the horrifying experience of being in a war is reduced to the stepping stone of the foregrounded heroism and maturation, which inspires the audience more about overcoming the "cowardice" and the deserved honor from the war. The whole story resolves through the smile of the young soldier when recalling the war, "for he saw that the world was a world for him... He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past ", while "a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds" [5], full of hope and future. Critics like Michael Schneider when considering the resolution of the ending conclude that it is a typical hero story, a "hero monomyth", borrowing Joseph Campbell's term, where the protagonist undergoes the pattern of "separation, initiation, and return", and the "return" also appears to be an end result of "an assertion of manhood" [6].

However, the "nightmare" of battle by no means only remains in the past that eventually passes away "as flowers", and no character or relationship growth can be observed in Tim O'Brien's story. Unlike Crane's celebration of heroic development, the answer given by Tim O'Brien in his story to these questions is definitely negative. The narrator, a veteran returned from war, seems to still be stuck in the events happening twenty years ago. In "How to Tell a True War Story", he writes,

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story

happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the point? [6]

Here, he presents a hypothetical scene of a returned soldier being woken up by a wartime nightmare twenty years after its occurrence, narrated from a second-person perspective that calls the reader for an intimate identification with the situation by addressing "you" directly. Different from what Crane has believed, O'Brien highlights the constant coming-back of the torturing and personal memory (since people who have not experienced the war themselves, like "your wife", cannot understand) of the war experience, which imposes a lasting negative effect on a soldier's life to the point that he can never resume his original life.

This comparison thus leads us to the concept of trauma, especially in this case, postwar trauma. Contextualized by David Kerler, the idea of trauma is indeed a modern conception, as a result of a series of large-scale wars and in-depth peculiar studies on this aspect [7]. Trauma, he points out, is "a paradoxical presence/absence within the traumatized subject's psyche", emphasizing that trauma is a haunting experience whose incompleteness can never be fully grasped by any orderly "scheme of knowledge or meaningful narrative", or the grand récits [the grand narratives] in Lyotard's term. In another way of saying, Kerler's reading of Lyotard's theory in the sense of representing trauma in the postmodern narrative can actually imply that the narrative fragmentation is a perfect vessel to accommodate what is closest to the authentic traumatic experience, if not the "complete truth".

In "How to Tell a War Story", the sense of fragmentation derives from disrupting the chronological order of the original events. The story starts with a letter Rat writing to the sister of his dead friend Curt Lemon and the moment when Lemon died, narrated from the narrator's perspective. Then, the narrator suddenly becomes an audience of Mitchell Sanders' story about 6 guys hearing voices and sounds in the middle of the mountains. He goes on to tell a short story of Rat brutally killing a baby water buffalo and then bursting into tears, with Sanders being the audience this time. The last story is "Norman Bowker singing 'Lemon Tree'" as they threw down Lemon's body parts from the tree, which wakes him up twenty years later. Despite the fact that the central story focuses on the death of Curt Lemon, the arrangement of the stories across the entire text is far from a fixed linear way, conveying a strong sense of randomness in the crafting process, to the point that it does not make much difference even if the current narrative order is changed. Nevertheless, the seemingly scattered narrative actually revolves around the central topical question, "what is a true war story?", or even, "Is there really A true war story?", with each narrative

beginning with a straightforward and insightful definition of the meaning of the truth like “A true war story is never moral”, “a true war story cannot be believed”, or “the truths are contradictory”. As a result, O’Brien manages to construct an underlying coherence within the “chaos” on the surface.

Meanwhile, with those plain statements and the constant use of second-person perspective, he also draws the reader’s attention from the content of the story, yet to the story itself as a form of representation, or the act of story-telling itself. Just like how O’Brien writes in the story, “when a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed”. The juxtaposition of events can thus be understood as the repetitive act of looking away from and looking back to the central event that results in the traumatic experience, with the actual “happening truth” broken down into several fragments of narratives, conveying a sense of loss and instability as a consequence. Eventually, “a true war story is never about war...It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.” The telling of a war story, therefore, is transformed from a generalization of certain morals taking form in a story in order to convince or educate people, to the loyal representation of the experience itself, including its brokenness and the parts that cannot be represented.

3. THE MULTIPLICITY OF THE TRUTH IN THE WAR

Considering the fact that Tim O’Brien did serve in the American military during the Vietnam War, the question may arise if these war stories are actually based on his own experience, especially when “Tim O’Brien” is also one of the narrators of the stories. Yet, in regards to this question, O’Brien’s answer is rather definitive, claiming that “my own experience has virtually nothing to do with the content of the book” [8]. As a consequence, this act of breaking from a sole autobiographical form allows the stories’ dimension to be extended, able to accommodate various different perspectives and voices on their experience of the war. As also explained by O’Brien himself during the interview, “so to say that there is an ‘authentic Vietnam War story’ is ridiculous; there’s not just one; there’s millions of them depending on your values, where you were [stationed], and what you did [in your rank] when you were there, [and] what period of the war you were there.” By “authentic war story”, he means the so-called “happening truth”. In a similar way, it can also be regarded as the “truth” Michael Vlahos has coined

[9], which only allows the single voice of the institution or authority.

In this text, O’Brien illustrates his claim through the use of altering voices. The whole story itself consists of several narratives, some told by others, some experienced by the main narrator himself, and some completely fictional, with the major narrating voices being Rat, the narrator, and Mitchell Sanders. Regarding the death of Curt Lemon, it is first told by Rat in the letter to Lemon’s sister, yet more focused on the moments they shared when he was still alive, describing him as “his best friend in the world” and “soul mates” in a reminiscing tone, due to their close relationship. Then the narrator takes up the role of explaining how Lemon ended up dead at that moment. Instead of highlighting a dramatic reaction, like Rat who brutally killed a baby buffalo to express his intense grief, his tone sounds more detached and restrained, even saying that “when he died it was almost beautiful”. His suffering from trauma is only told when he was woken up by this nightmare twenty years after that.

Multiple perspectives have also been provided to the reader to understand this death to grasp a thorough and differing understanding of war trauma taking effect on different people. As Lyotard has argued, the renewed postmodern narrative’s function is to “refine our sensitivity to differences and reinforce our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” whose legitimacy is denied by the universal truth. One thing also worth noting is how the trauma of the war is concentrated on one moment, one single soldier’s death, instead of a grand-scale depiction of the entire warfare. Consequently, the narration turns out to be highly personalized and even more emotionally intimate. It emphasizes the soldier as an individual with emotions, shattering the traditional representation of nationalized heroic soldiers who are rid of any cowardice or “nightmare of the past”. The greatness in meaning and characterization in the narrative function is indeed lost. In this sense, O’Brien’s multi-perspective narrative can also be regarded as the undermined individual testimony that is long neglected by the grand narrative.

However, it is also O’Brien’s emphasis on the individual experience prior to the cultural truth that arises criticism on the danger of solipsism. Despite admitting the fact that such solipsism does question the universal truth, Michael Travel Clarke has suggested that the multiplicity of “truth” constructed by various perspectives can fundamentally “deny the very existence of a reality outside of language” [10], absorbed in a highly personalized perspective to an extreme that excludes others. For example, the perspectives being represented in the story are all from the American veterans’ side, as a result of which, Vietnam’s voices, their sufferings, and trauma, are basically excluded from the picture. Even when they are represented (as in other

short stories in *The Things They Carried*), it is also hard to completely sort out the possibility of stereotypical understanding.

Regarding that, Lyotard's "local determinism" may actually provide a lens to understand O'Brien's limited representation. In the cultural or conceptive realm, one's perspective is indeed regionally specific to certain ideologies and cultural norms. Nevertheless, by shifting the voices and denying a settled institutionalized "truth", O'Brien opens the possibility of multidimensional truth which varies according to each and every individual, including other voices like the Vietnamese. The truth, as he has claimed throughout the whole story, is essentially what is true to one's personal experience. "True war stories do not generalize," O'Brien's juxtaposition of narrative perspectives thus constructs a complicated collection of "truth" that looks into the events from multiple angles, and always opens to potentially more perspectives.

4. CONCLUSION

Mainly taking in the form of multiplying narrative voices and disrupting the chronological order, the fragmentation of narrative in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" is a careful authorly gesture to construct a representation of the brokenness of traumatic experience, as well as to express the multiplicity of the notion of truth itself in the representation of war. While various academic research has delved into O'Brien's exploration of truth, this essay adopts the lens of Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern theory to grasp an enhanced understanding of how exactly O'Brien interrogates the objective, singular truth provided by the historical metanarrative that is traditionally used to narrate the war. The truth is no longer just about the actual events, but juxtaposing with multi-dimensional subjective experiences. As a consequence, in this essay, the reading through the lens of Lyotard's theory allows a reflection on the conventional singular truth that is determined by the authoritative institution, shifting the attention back to the individual experience that is largely underrepresented in the grand narratives. Meanwhile, extending from the formal analysis of O'Brien's war story, the future studies can focus more on the reality level such as the public reception, as such move of anti-heroism in the postmodern war narrative may also call for attention to the veterans who have actually suffered from post-war trauma and are excluded from the public.

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