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Emily A. Nye  
*College of William and Mary*

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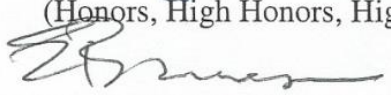
Telling the Stories that Can't Be Told:  
Translating War in Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

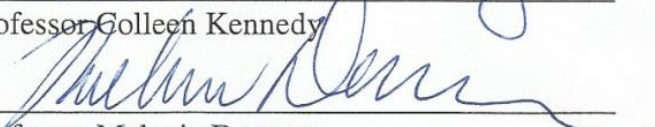
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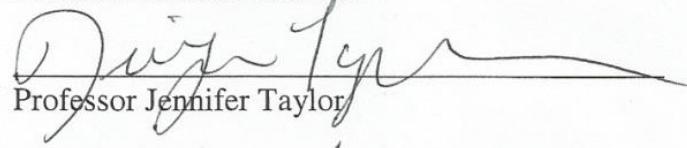
Emily A. Nye

Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Elizabeth Barnes, Director

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Colleen Kennedy

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Melanie Dawson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Jennifer Taylor

Williamsburg, VA  
May 2, 2016

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## Introduction

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

– Tim O'Brien  
*The Things They Carried*

War has long bloodied the pages of literature. How could it not? The aim of literature – of *all* art – after all, is the creation of an honest portrait of the human experience, and, as “war is part of the intercourse of the human race,” its frequency in literature is not only justified, it is *necessary* (Hemingway 1). Stories of war can be found in texts from every world culture and era. From Homer's *The Iliad*, to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, to *The Holy Bible*, war literature has become an essential means to coping with and attempting to understand a complex and violent human history. As Ernest Hemingway writes in the introduction to his World War I novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), it is because of this universality that “a writer should be interested in the constant, bullying, murderous, slovenly crime of war” (Hemingway ix). With this in mind, it is easy to recognize the *why* of war literature; however, less often considered is the *how*? How exactly do war authors, specifically veteran authors who have witnessed the brutality of battle firsthand, translate the horrors of war – traumatic and incomprehensible – into works of authentic war fiction? How does one tell the stories that can't be told?

The art of crafting war fiction brings with it a particular set of challenges, primarily due to the fact that war, as subject matter, resists many conventions of “traditional” storytelling – commonly used narrative techniques such as forward linearity, temporal continuity, and the presence of a clear and defined morality, which over time and repeated use have become standards of conventional fiction. The reality of war,

however, is not a reality which easily translates into what one might consider “traditional” fiction. War is unpredictable, fragmentary, and at times, unintelligible – creating obstacles for authors attempting to translate incomprehensible violence into a coherent piece of literature. In addition, in war, as in other forms of tragedy and disaster, there exists a chasm between the morbid reality and the threshold of human understanding. Not only do war authors, and even more so veteran war authors, face a challenge in attempting to communicate the horrors of war to a naïve audience largely incapable of true comprehension, but in working with trauma as subject matter, war authors must recognize that often, as Tim O’Brien writes in *The Things They Carried*, “there is no rectitude whatsoever” to be “salvaged from the larger waste” (O’Brien 65). Where much fiction often concludes with a moral message or the assignment of meaning to a particular situation, war, at its essence, is unfathomably violent. As Kurt Vonnegut writes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (Vonnegut 24). Because war resists so many of the elements of “traditional” fiction, many war authors of the twentieth century turned toward new experimental narrative strategies in an attempt to translate war – violent, shapeless, and traumatic – into authentic literature without reducing or falsely manipulating the war experience.

Ernest Hemingway’s post-World War I collection, *In Our Time* (1925), Kurt Vonnegut’s World War II novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam War novel, *The Things They Carried* (1990) are three works of twentieth-century American war fiction which seek to do just that. Though these three works are certainly not the only examples of experimental war fiction to be found in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature, they are tied together by several continuities, despite being written in

different decades and about different wars. First, each author is a veteran of the war about which they write. Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in World War I, Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in World War II, and O'Brien was a foot soldier in Vietnam – thus lending a level of validity and credibility to their accounts of war. Second, and more importantly, these three authors are linked by the self-awareness with which they approach the struggle of writing about war, and their fiction is marked by a forthright and conscious effort to alleviate the dissonance between war and fiction. Each author, in his own way, attempts to confront the challenge of “How to Tell a True War Story.”

Skepticism toward the concept of truth and the idea of “true war stories” is also common among the three authors. In an interview for this thesis, O'Brien explained that, in writing *The Things They Carried*, “the purpose of the story was to kind of undermine, or sabotage the word “true” and show that it’s really a complicated, fluid word” (Interview 2). This philosophy – that no absolute truth exists – is reflected in the authors’ common distrust of conventional narrative techniques such as the use of romanticized war rhetoric, a linear treatment of time, or the assertion of moral absolutes. Despite the fact that each of the three texts concerns a different war and that each work was composed during a different time period and thus a different sociocultural environment, their continuous pursuit of new narrative methods seems to suggest that the only absolute truth of war literature is the altogether ironic inability of literature to truly capture or depict the experience of war. This question of how to narrate the un-narratable is consciously and directly addressed in each work, resulting in a portrait of war which strives toward authenticity while simultaneously articulating the limits of narration.

The idea of narrating the un-narratable itself has a unique history, one that brings together war and narrative technique. The twin developments of World War I and the Modernist movement in art creates an interesting dynamic in war literature. Though there can be no exact date upon which to designate the onset of literary Modernism, an oft-echoed quote by English Modernist Virginia Woolf seems to be the preeminent doctrine: “On or about December 1910, human character changed” (Singal 7). Though its essence can hardly be reduced to a mere set of representative characteristics, Paul Poplawski’s *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* (2003) presents a commendable interpretation of the movement, noting:

...its profound concern with themes of alienation, fragmentation, and the loss of shared values and meanings...depictions of modernism also typically draw attention to the self-conscious focus in modernist art on the very processes of making meaning and on the difficulties and complexities of representation and perception. Thus, questions of ambiguity, relativity, and subjectivity, along with linguistic experimentation and formal experiments in disordered chronology and shifting points of view, all feature prominently in most discussions of modernism, as does the fundamental importance to modernism of psychology and the elusive workings of the conscious and unconscious mind (Poplawski ix).

Literary modernism sought a conscious break from tradition, and strived to construct a portrait of the human experience that was raw and authentic and new. Though the influence of Modernism can still be felt to this day, the movement is generally regarded

to have peaked during the twenty-one year period between the end of World War I in 1918 and the beginning of World War II in 1939.

The long-term effects of the sociocultural forces at play during this brief twenty-one year period cannot be overstated. Modernism developed during a time when the world was struggling to comprehend a horror beyond the threshold of human imagination, and though modernist techniques are far from exclusive in their application to war fiction, they did lend themselves particularly well to the task of writing about World War I for, as Mathew Stewart writes in his book, *Modernism and Tradition in Hemingway's In Our Time* (2001), “new times required the development of new techniques” (Stewart 14). The dissonance between war and fiction was only heightened by the mass carnage of World War I, and consequently, Modernism, which consciously sought new methods of storytelling, rose to prominence as a means of bridging the divide between unintelligible trauma and fiction. Trudi Tate, in her book *Modernism, History and the First World War* (1998), notes this distinct connection:

War, like writing, shapes perception. For Gertrude Stein, the Great War made modernism readable; it ‘created the completed recognition of the contemporary composition.’ Modernism, like other writings of the period, attempts to make the war ‘readable’ and to write it into history. The First World War is often perceived as a complete break with the past (Tate 4).

The two phenomena – World War I and Modernism – fed into one another in cyclical regeneration, resulting in a literary landscape in conscious pursuit of new and more authentic ways to write about war.



Hemingway fell right at the crossroads of World War I and the rise of literary Modernism. After returning home from World War I in 1919, Hemingway returned to Europe to work as a foreign correspondent for *The Toronto Star*. It was during this time that the young writer fell into an elite circle of literary revolutionists – the forbearers of Modernism – including Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ezra Pound.

Hemingway's personal war experiences coupled with the avant-garde literary environment of Paris put him in a unique position, one which would shape the way war fiction would be written for years to come.

A Stewart explains, "*In Our Time* is the culmination of Hemingway's literary apprenticeship in Paris" (Stewart 12). The collection is marked by Hemingway's use of then-revolutionary Modernist techniques to portray both the violence of war and of the quotidian. "Although he took no interest in theorizing about the issue, Hemingway shared a belief common among modernist writers that good fiction transcended being a mere transcription of the world and thus achieved a status that was truer than true" (Stewart 13). This notion – of telling a *true* war story, of transcending the bounds of literature and language in order to create *truth* – resonates throughout *In Our Time*.

Hemingway was one of the first writers to successfully apply Modernist techniques to war literature; however, both Kurt Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* also make use of experimental literary strategies, many of which stem from and speak to the experimental Modernist techniques of Hemingway's day. As Richard Gray writes in *A History of American Literature* (2012):

Modernism was, in effect, shading into postmodernism, with its resistance to finality and closure...its preference for suspended judgments [and]

mistrust of solutions, denouements and completions. It encouraged forms of writing that thrived on the edge, that denied the authoritative in favor of the arbitrary and posited a random, unstructured world as well as an equally random, unstructured art (Gray).

Postmodernism saw the rise of such narrative techniques as black humor, fragmentation, temporal discontinuity, and metafictional approaches to literature – many of which can be seen in the works of Vonnegut and O'Brien.

Vonnegut recognized the inadequacy of certain “traditional” literary conventions to authentically discuss war, a point he addressed in a 1987 National Public Radio interview with Terry Gross:

My own feeling is that civilization ended in World War I, and we're still trying to recover from that. Much of the blame is the malarkey that artists have created to glorify war, which as we all know, is nonsense, and a good deal worse than that — romantic pictures of battle, and of the dead and men in uniform and all that. And I did not want to have that story told again (National Public Radio).

It is these “romantic pictures of battle” that Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien refute as inauthentic. Alternatively, all three men strived to create realistic and “true” portraits of war, works that do not glamorize and instead cleave to honesty and obscenity. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien notes that in a “true” war story, “There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (O'Brien 65-66). In order to portray

the “obscurity” of war in a way that was not romanticized or sensationalist, Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O’Brien turned toward new literary strategies.

These three novels converge in their experimentation across three areas and the chapters of this thesis are divided accordingly. The first chapter, “How to Tell a True War Story,” borrows its title from a chapter of the same name in O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, and examines the different ways in which each of these three works consciously approach the idea of “truth” as it applies to both war and to war fiction. As mentioned before, these works bring a distinct self-awareness to the challenge of writing about war, and often the texts work to make the reader equally conscious of the author’s struggles. For example, in true metafictional form, both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Things They Carried* include the genesis of the novel as part of the text, oftentimes breaking the “fourth wall” and diverging from the narrative in order to directly address the reader and straightforwardly explain why they, the author, made the creative choices that they did. As Catherine Calloway writes in “‘How to Tell a True War Story:’ Meta-Fiction in *The Things They Carried*:”

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (2)” (Calloway).

This idea can be seen in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Written in the voice of Kurt Vonnegut (although this is never explicitly specified), this chapter chronicles the

creative process that the novel's author sustained in writing the novel, taking ample time to discuss the challenges Vonnegut faced in specifically writing about war, and even going as far as to explain such intricacies as how the book got its title. It is important to note that this is not written as an introduction to the text, but rather as a chapter inclusive in the narrative, establishing that the process of actually *writing* the novel is as important as the narrative content of the novel itself. By "signposting," or rather, by forthrightly communicating the inability of literature to truly capture the violence of war, Vonnegut demonstrates the struggle faced by soldiers and authors alike in how to use language to talk and write about an experience which language can never truly represent.

Truth, as applied to war and trauma, is multi-dimensional. First and foremost, war authors must consider the difficulties of telling the "truth" to an audience accustomed to a set of preordained lies. War authors must also account for the differences among various types of truths – most significantly, the difference between "literal truth" and "emotional truth." As O'Brien explains, a fictional story containing fictional events can still be "true," stating that in *The Things They Carried*, "I'm not trying to be accurate in terms of events, because they're made up. I'm trying to be accurate in terms of the feel of things...Trying to be faithful to emotion is really my main effort" (Interview 6-7). This idea of "emotionally true fiction" was a philosophy shared by Hemingway. In the book, *By-line: Ernest Hemingway: Selected Articles and Dispatches of Four Decades* (1967), a collection of Hemingway's work as a newspaper reporter, Hemingway notes, "Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up it is as it would truly be" (Hemingway 215). Writers need not be

absolutely literal or absolutely autobiographical in their storytelling, so long as the end product communicates an authentically “true” emotional account of being in a war. This creates a unique challenge for war authors in that they must create *fictional* events that still communicate the emotional truth of war.

The second chapter of this thesis is titled, “In Our Time and Memory” and examines each author’s treatment of time as well as memory. Time, like truth, is also multi-dimensional, especially when considered in war writing, and can be creatively exploited to open discourse on a myriad of concepts, for example: the fragmentary nature of memory, or the function of fate and free will. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrates perhaps the most interesting approach to time. Protagonist Billy Pilgrim, a WWII soldier who has been detained at a POW camp in Dresden, claims to have been abducted by an alien race, the Tralfamadorians, and emerges with the belief that time, as humans understand it, is an illusion. The Tralfamadorians experience time in a fourth dimension – where they are able to see all of the moments of their life happening simultaneously. This has interesting implications when considering its inclusion in a war novel. By having Billy Pilgrim experience his life in seemingly random snapshots, Vonnegut suggests the fragmentary nature of memory, and also of war; for, as Vonnegut said in his 1973 Interview with David Standish, “we do live our lives simultaneously. That’s a *fact*” (Allen 77). This idea of fragmentary time and memory is also present in the writings of Tim O’Brien. O’Brien describes the role time plays in memory, stating, “When you look back on your life, a day later or ten years later, you forget what came first, and what came second, and what came third. You forget the linearity...You’re left with little snapshots – little tiny movies in our memories, and then blankness” (Interview

4). O'Brien goes on to elaborate on how this idea of time and memory influenced the structure of his novel, *The Things They Carried*, which is written in chapters that function as "little snapshots," stating, "I wanted to structure the book, or have a form of the book, that wasn't linear. These are the memories of this character" (Interview 5). Time and memory are important elements to consider when crafting war fiction and Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien each approach these elements in a creative and different way.

The third and final chapter of this thesis is titled "So It Goes..." and explores each work's treatment of death. Common to all three texts is a portrayal of death and violence as inevitable and unavoidable. For example, every death in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is followed by the simple phrase, "So it goes." This seemingly simple phrase has a powerful effect in that Vonnegut can ironically illustrate the constancy of death and destruction in war while simultaneously demonstrating the narrator's desensitization to the incessant death which surrounds him. The passive and apathetic attitude with which Vonnegut approaches death and violence reinforces the idea that language cannot adequately depict trauma. Rather than attempting to use ornate language to describe the destruction of war, and in doing so detract from the purity of the experience, Vonnegut recognized that in the case of war writing, less is more, and often all there is to say is "So it goes."

Writing about war in the twentieth century required an innovative, yet careful approach to narrative fiction. Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien took creative steps in order to ensure narrative purity in their work, employing modernist and post-modernist techniques in an attempt to transcend the limits of language. These three American authors rejected "tradition" in favor of modernization, and in doing so, crafted new ways to tell the stories that can't be told.

### How to Tell a True War Story

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. 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.

– Tim O’Brien  
*The Things They Carried*

A concern with the nuanced and multidimensional idea of “truth,” both in regards to war as well as war fiction is common among Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O’Brien, and is a concept examined at length in each text. As their work demonstrates, there exists no “absolute truth,” no bona-fide, all-encompassing truth which can be universally applied. As O’Brien writes in his chapter “How to Tell a True War Story:”

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat...To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true” (O’Brien 77).

Rather than attempt to portray a false ubiquitous truth in war, these three authors work to depict a composite truth – one where the veracity lies in the component parts which, when summed, result in a portrait of truth which is itself fragmentary and contradictory, and thus, more authentic. As Calloway writes, “True war stories, the reader soon realizes, are like the nature of the Vietnam War itself; ‘the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity’ (88). ‘The final and definitive truth’ (83) cannot be derived, and any ‘truths are contradictory’ (87)” (Calloway). It is only by embracing the intricacies of truth within

the philosophy, content, and language of their writings, that these war authors were able to create more comprehensive and authentic tellings of war.

Of the many fictional narrative accounts of the Vietnam War, few can claim such widespread success as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's 1990 novel details the wartime experiences of a fictional young soldier, also named Tim O'Brien. Compiled as a collection of short stories that function both as a composite novel as well as a series of individual, stand-alone narratives, *The Things They Carried* presents an account of war that strives consciously toward authenticity. Selling over 2 million copies worldwide, and achieving such merits as the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize and selection as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *The Things They Carried* is one of today's most honest reflections on the Vietnam War.

Throughout the novel, O'Brien works to demonstrate the fact that truth is multidimensional, nuanced, and often arbitrary. The process of dismantling the truth begins on the very cover of the novel with the author's name. The protagonist of the novel is also named Tim O'Brien. Right from the start, the reader begins to question the absolute truth of the events to be told. The double name coupled with the fact that O'Brien (author) was also a Vietnam War veteran, leads many readers to incorrectly assume that *The Things They Carried* is a work of autobiography. This misconception is exacerbated when the reader turns the page to the dedication of the novel. The dedication reads, "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa" (O'Brien). As the reader will come to find, *The Things They Carried* focuses on the soldiers of "Alpha Company," and the men in the dedication are the novel's



characters. This logically leads the reader to believe, again, that *The Things They Carried* is a work of non-fiction. However, this is not the case. Why would an author, especially one with personal experience fighting in the Vietnam War, write a novel about the Vietnam War using fictional events and characters, but using his own name? This seems counterintuitive – wouldn't the *actual* events of a war communicate the experience of war more authentically? Why would an author choose fiction over reality?

One answer is: reality does not always equal truth. As O'Brien explains, "I wanted to write a book that might read like non-fiction, that this could have happened. The choice of my own name – to use it, some of my own background – to use it, dedicating the book to the characters – there were a whole bunch of things that I thought, well, just try to write a book that when the reader is reading it will feel as if it could be, in the literal sense, true" (Interview 4). Here, O'Brien specifically denotes "literal" truth, implying the existence of other types of truths. In this case, true writing also involves accurately portraying the emotional side of the experience – the overall feel of an event. Oftentimes, merely recounting reality does not effectively communicate this other type of truth. Reality is limited by bias, time, and the distance of memory, diluting the emotional potency, and thus, truth of the experience. However, fiction is not so limited. Characters and scenes can be created to bridge this gap, picking up where reality left off. It is for this reason that fiction can sometimes be more "true" than reality.

Throughout the novel, O'Brien works to differentiate between two other different types of truths which he calls the "story truth" and the "happening truth." In the chapter titled, "Good Form," O'Brien takes one of his many asides from the narratives of Alpha Company, and addresses this discrepancy using a direct discourse method where he

breaks the “fourth wall” in order to speak directly to the reader. He begins in a voice indiscernible between author and character, “I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is,” referring to the fact that most of the book is fictional instead of autobiographical (O’Brien 171). He continues, explaining that “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (O’Brien 171). O’Brien then goes on to juxtapose two different ways of telling the same scenario. The “happening truth,” or reality, reads:

I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief (O’Brien 172).

In contrast, the “story truth,” or fiction, reads:

He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him (O’Brien 172).

Both of these accounts refer back several chapters in the novel to a chapter titled, “The Man I Killed.” For an author like O’Brien, whose own memories, due to distance or fading memory, may more closely follow the “happening truth” model, fiction writing allows him to fill in the details in a manner that elicits the same emotional response he felt at the time he experienced the event. He may no longer be able to accurately paint the literally true memory in as graphic a way, but he can create a new, fictional memory that elicits the same response, and is in that way, equally or even more true than the absolute occurrence. “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I

never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (O’Brien 172). Fictional writing breaks down the limitations of writing about the past in a way that makes it powerful in the present.

O’Brien writes with a purposeful focus on emotional truth, rather than literal truth, which he affirms as the more important of the two. As O’Brien explains, “I’m not trying to be accurate in terms of events, because they’re made up. I’m trying to be accurate in terms of the feel of things” (Interview 6-7). The story’s portrayal of the actual truth is irrelevant, as long as the emotion is accurate. It is for this reason Tim O’Brien uses his own name for the novel’s protagonist, and why he is able to dedicate the novel to the characters about which he writes. Not only does doing this add a level of legitimacy to his writings, but because he writes according to emotional truth instead of literal truth, it no longer matters whether the characters or events were literally true or not. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien writes, “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (O’Brien 79-80). The dedication to Jimmy Cross is actually meant as a dedication to all the men and women who have felt the emotional truth of those characters.

O’Brien opens “How to Tell a True War Story” with a simple sentence: “This is true” (O’Brien 64). O’Brien is establishing a concept that he will spend the rest of the chapter deconstructing. The simple sentence structure of the opening suggests the idea that the truth is simple – absolute and consistent. By the end of this chapter, however, O’Brien will come to prove that the truth is just the opposite.

The chapter continues with an example of a “true war story:” an anecdote about a man named Rat Kiley, a member of Alpha Company whose friend, Curt Lemon was just

blown apart. After Lemon is killed, Rat sits down and writes a letter to Lemon's sister back home. For two pages, O'Brien tells us, "Rat pours his heart out. He says he loved the guy. He says the guy was his best friend in the world. They were like soul mates, he says, like twins or something, they had a whole lot in common" (O'Brien 65). Rat has been put through immense trauma – having just lost his best friend and having to break the news to the deceased's sister. Following the basic story arc, this emotional climax would usually be followed by a resolution of sorts. Perhaps Rat's letter will be applauded by Lemon's parents for its beauty and emotional magnitude. Or perhaps Lemon's sister will write back, providing Rat with some kind of closure. Fiction tradition implies that there must be some "payoff" in the end that makes Rat's suffering worth it, something that assures the reader it was not all just for nothing. However, the anecdote simply ends, "Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back" (O'Brien 65). At the end of Rat Kiley's tale, the reader is left feeling hopeless, empty, even robbed, and that is exactly the point. In war, there is no guarantee of resolution or rectitude. There is no guarantee of validity, or that everything will be alright in the end. Instead, the only way to tell a true war story is to hold fast to an "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (O'Brien 65). O'Brien rejects the notion that fiction should have a forced or unnaturally satisfying resolution, and denies the idea that there should be some justifying reason for the trauma inflicted upon the character. By withholding resolution, O'Brien maintains his "allegiance to obscenity," and in doing so, demonstrates the ugly realities of war which sensationalist accounts of war have chosen to exploit.

O'Brien's commitment to obscenity is complemented by his rejection of morality or the assignment of any greater "meaning" to war. Throughout the novel, we witness

numerous instances where O'Brien (both author and character) struggles in search of a truth – any truth – to which he can cleave. In the very first chapter titled, "The Things They Carried," we learn the story of Ted Lavender, the first death in the novel. Lavender was shot down by the enemy while returning from the latrine. After his body is carried away, two characters – Kiowa and Norman Bowker – sit in the night trying to make sense of his death. This section of the story, which is told largely through Kiowa's stream of consciousness, depicts the struggle for some kind of underlying truth behind Lavender's death. Kiowa remarks that, "It seemed unchristian. He wished he could find some great sadness, or even anger, but the emotion wasn't there and he couldn't make it happen" (O'Brien 17). The rest of the passage depicts Kiowa's struggle to understand the unceremonious way that Lavender died, for as Kiowa says so bluntly, he was "Zapped while zipping" (O'Brien 16). However, there is no greater meaning behind the anticlimactic death. War strips away identifiable truths, whether that is the idea of a glory-filled, dignified death, basic concepts of justice, or the hope for good to prevail. As O'Brien states, "In war, truth is the first casualty...all the kind of standards, or so-called truths that we enter in a war holding as individuals get undermined by a war and you're left with a swirling, gray foggy ambiguity. Nothing seems true" (Interview 2). These truths that "we enter in a war holding" – glorified ideals such as honor, glory, and bravery – are not the real truths of war. Instead, more often, there is simply no truth to present. This creates a challenge for writers of war fiction, whose audiences are accustomed to reading stories with a discernible meaning or underlying moral truth.

This idea of stories without morals – where no greater meaning can be articulated – is a common theme throughout all of the novels. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien directly comments on the inappropriateness of a “moral” in a “true war story:”

In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe “Oh” (O’Brien 74).

This exact sentiment is echoed in the death of character Kiowa eight chapters later. In “Speaking of Courage,” Alpha Company member Norman Bowker has returned home from Vietnam, and is seen struggling to reconcile the ideas that people want to hear about war with the truth of what really happened. Bowker drives the seven mile loop around his local town lake repeatedly, recalling all the things he wishes he could say.

Bowker recalls a night when his company camped along a river called the Song Tra Bong against local advice. That night, the platoon was attacked. Simultaneously, the relentless rain causes the river to flood, turning the ground to sewage all around Alpha Company: “The field was boiling. The shells made deep slushy craters, opening up all those years of waste, centuries worth, and the smell came bubbling out of the earth” (O’Brien 142). Suddenly, Kiowa is hit by a shell. He falls to the ground and the earth begins to literally swallow him alive. “All [Bowker] could do was watch. He heard himself moan. Then he moved again, crabbing forward, but when he got there Kiowa was almost completely under. There was a knee. There was an arm and a gold wristwatch and part of a boot” (O’Brien 142). Kiowa is deconstructed in his death just as the reader’s perceptions of honorable death are deconstructed. The moral is the contract between

author and reader; however, here there is no moral to present. In traditional fictional narratives, a traumatic death of this magnitude should stand for something, but in this case, Kiowa did not die a brave death, an honorable death, or for any meaningful or higher purpose. He was simply shot down, in the wrong place at the wrong time, and swallowed alive in a field of feces. It is nothing more than an unfortunate event of war; there is no greater message or purpose here. Kiowa's ugly and traumatic death just happened, and in the end, the only thing left to say about the matter is simply "Oh."

Veteran war authors must not only undergo the difficult challenge of creating authentic war fiction, but must also face the difficult reality that readers do not want to hear the authentic truth. There is a sensationalism in the traditional rhetoric of war – abstract words, such as "honor," "glory," or "bravery." Several of O'Brien's characters struggle with the romanticized language often used to talk about war and O'Brien himself displays a disliking for abstract words stating, "They make me shiver. I don't like them. The abstract language has a kind of ideology underneath it all. 'In vain' – I hear it about Vietnam – all these 'my son did not die in vain, there must have been a purpose behind it,' which I didn't see" (Interview 5-6). In "Speaking of Courage," we witness Norman Bowker struggling with how to speak about his war experience. While on his repeated seven mile lake loop drive, Bowker recalls the night he "almost won the Silver Star" for valor – referring to the night he tried to save Kiowa from the Song Tra Bong field (O'Brien 135). As Bowker drives, he hosts imaginary conversations with himself where he tells local people, such as his father or random workmen or one time love interest Sally Kramer, the truth about what happened to him in Vietnam, specifically at the Song Tra Bong. He imagines Sally Kramer's reaction to the *real* truth of Vietnam:

“I mean, we were camped in a goddamn *shit* field.”

He imagined Sally Kramer closing her eyes.

If she were here with him, in the car, she would’ve said, “Stop it. I don’t like that word.”

“That’s what it *was*.”

“All right, but you don’t have to use that word.”

“Fine. What should we call it?”

She would have glared at him. “I don’t know. Just stop it.”

Clearly, he thought, this was not a story for Sally Kramer”

(O’Brien 139).

Bowker is aware that his truth of war is distinctly different from the truth he is expected to tell, much the way that *The Things They Carried* is distinctly different from the romanticized war fiction that readers expect. At the end of his recollection, Bowker goes on to say that the Song Tra Bong was “A good war story...but it was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink. They wanted good intentions and good deeds” (O’Brien 143). Bowker is struggling the way many soldiers struggle – how does one tell a truth which no one wants to hear?

In Hemingway’s 1929 WWI novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, his protagonist muses:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain...There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity...Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete



names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates (Hemingway 161).

This notion of subverting abstract ideals such as courage, bravery, and heroism is also explored in Hemingway's *In Our Time*. The collection includes sixteen short stories, each separated by a short vignette. The content of the stories largely varies, with several tales focusing on war and soldier adjustment post-war, and with other stories focusing on the quotidian. The vignettes, too, vary in content. Many are brutal, blunt scenes of war violence, while others discuss gory bullfighting scenes or criminal executions of multiple varieties. However, despite the varying content, there is an overarching theme that ties the collection together. *In Our Time* works to juxtapose the violence and the horrors of war with the violence and horrors of everyday life in order to present a portrait of a cohesive world wracked by chaos and blindly grappling for an unobtainable peace. This fact is further supported in the juxtaposition of the violent content of the collection with the title, *In Our Time*, "an ironic echo from the Book of Common Prayer: 'Give us peace in our time, O Lord'" (Burhans 16). These juxtapositions had a powerful effect and the collection was revolutionary for its time. Hemingway's grandson, Seán Hemingway, in his 2003 introduction to *Hemingway on War* writes of *In Our Time*'s staying power:

It seems impossible that the destruction and devastation of lives could be forgotten: the awful contrasts between peace and war in Hemingway's first book, *In Our Time*, are as relevant today as they were shockingly modern in 1925 (S. Hemingway xxxvi).

It is for this reason that *In Our Time* remains one of Hemingway's most widely-read texts to date. Hemingway's raw, bitter portrayal of war coupled with his blunt insight into the

violence of everyday life has made *In Our Time* a unique vessel through which to consider the human experience.

Like O'Brien, the idea of writing "true war stories" was also of great concern to Hemingway. In a 1939 letter to Russian critic Ivan Kashkin, Hemingway wrote of his desire to paint the truest picture of war:

For your information in stories about the war I try to show *all* the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and examining it from many ways...We know war is bad. Yet sometimes it is necessary to fight. But still war is bad and any man who says it is not is a liar. But it is very complicated and difficult to write about truly...I would like to be able to write understandingly about both deserters and heroes, cowards and brave men, traitors and men who are not capable of being traitors. We learned a lot about all such people (Phillips 23-24).

The idea of showing all the sides of war – both the beautiful and the horrific – in a way that is authentic as well as true is the driving force behind *In Our Time*. The collection not only displays a steadfast devotion to the portrayal of obscenity, but also demonstrates a desire to strike down the abstract rhetoric of war.

Of all the short stories in *In Our Time*, none more articulately portrays the struggle to tell the truth than "Soldier's Home." This short story, similar to O'Brien's "Speaking of Courage," follows a young man named Harold Krebs who has just returned home from war, and who now struggles to find understanding in his family and community. Krebs' greatest challenge is in attempting to reconcile the truth of his war experiences with the preordained ideals that his family and community have come to

expect from soldiers. In order to deal with these expectations, Krebs begins to lie, feeding sensationalist stories to an audience that “had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities” (Hemingway 145). In telling these lies, Krebs gains not the understanding he desires, but rather he loses a part of himself:

His lies were quite unimportant lies and consisted in attributing to himself things other men had seen, done or heard of, and stating as facts certain apocryphal incidents familiar to all soldiers...Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration, and when he occasionally met another man who had really been a soldier and they talked a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers: that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything (Hemingway 146).

In this passage, Krebs struggles between telling the truth of his experience – the “actualities” – and telling the “atrocity stories” – the glorified accounts of war that people back home were accustomed to hearing.

Hemingway, like O’Brien, also asserts that fiction writing can present a more emotionally true telling of the war experience than even recalling the actual events can. Hemingway reflects upon this very idea when he considers Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* in the introduction to his war story anthology, *Men at War*:

Crane wrote [*The Red Badge of Courage*] before he had ever seen any war. But he had read contemporary accounts, had heard the old soldiers, they were not so old then, talk...Creating his story out of this material he

wrote that great boy's dream of war that was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see (Hemingway xvii).

Hemingway admired Crane's approach to writing war fiction. By researching and reading the accounts of multiple soldiers who had served, Crane was able to extract the emotional core from these soldiers' accounts and infuse his own fiction with the emotional essence of their war experiences. In a piece written for *Esquire Magazine* in 1934 titled, "Old Newsman Writes: A Letter from Cuba," (*By-line*), Hemingway outlines his belief that writing need not be absolutely true to still be a "true" story:

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer (Hemingway 184).

Hemingway maintains that fiction – good fiction – can create an experience that is truer than the truth. As long as the emotion transferred is still authentic to reality, the narrated events need not have actually occurred.

Falling between Hemingway and O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 World War II novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is arguably the most unique war novel of the twentieth century. *Slaughterhouse-Five* follows protagonist Billy Pilgrim as he recounts his experience as an American soldier and Chaplain's Assistant in World War II. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is particularly unique in the war literature canon because it combines war fiction with science fiction. The novel's focus is on Pilgrim's witness to

the American fire-bombing of German Dresden; however, the narration is frequently interrupted by flashbacks in the form of time travel, as well as Billy's abduction by the alien race of Tralfamadorians, which many argue is Vonnegut's creative take on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This unique approach to translating the war experience helped *Slaughterhouse-Five* stand out from its contemporaries, earning the novel a spot on Time Magazine's list of the 100 best novels written in the English language since 1923 (Time.com). The novel has easily become Vonnegut's most identifiable work.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the idea of "truth" is brought into question right from page one. The first two sentences of the novel read, "All of this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (Vonnegut 1). These two short sentences are incredibly powerful. First, they help to establish the relaxed, satirical tone that Vonnegut will continue to employ for the remainder of the novel. However, more importantly, they prime the reader to question the absolute truth of the novel's plot. Vonnegut juxtaposes words and phrases of certainty, such as "all of this happened" and "true" with phrases of uncertainty, such as "more or less" and "pretty much." From this point on, the reader will question the validity of the plot, making it nearly impossible to discern any absolute truths.

The first chapter of the novel presents an interesting disconnect from the rest of the story. Written in the first person by what the reader can only assume is the voice of Kurt Vonnegut, the chapter describes the narrator's desire to write a war book about Dresden. The narrator, who is revealed to be an older veteran who was present at Dresden, describes the challenges he faced in writing this book, stating:

When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen...But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then – not enough of them to make a book, anyway (Vonnegut 2-3).

This echoes the authorial asides of O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*. In both of these novels, the reader is made explicitly aware of the author's struggles in writing that story, again calling attention to the inadequacy of fiction to truly capture the war experience.

In an attempt to avoid the "obscene" abstract rhetoric of war, Vonnegut makes a distinct differentiation between the "right" and "wrong" way to tell true war stories, denouncing sensationalized accounts in favor of more humble tellings. The character Roland Weary, for example, has a habit of over-inflating and romanticizing his experiences in battle. In one section, Vonnegut sets up a direct compare and contrast between Billy and Weary. First, Vonnegut presents Billy's narration of the event:

His vision of the outside world was limited to what he could see through a narrow slit between the rim of his helmet and his scarf from home, which concealed his baby face from the bridge of his nose on down. He was so snug at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war story – whereas the true war story was still going on (Vonnegut 52-53).

Here, Vonnegut presents an honest account of Billy's experience. He does not hide behind empty words such as "bravery" or "courage." Billy very clearly is afraid – he hides behind his scarf from home and is not mentally present, choosing instead to

fantasize that he is back home telling war stories to his family rather than living the real war story happening all around him. This passage exposes the ugly, less desirable side of war – embracing cowardice and apathy. Weary’s approach, however, is just the opposite:

Weary’s version of the true war story went like this. There was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary. So it goes. And then Weary tied in with two scouts, and they became close friends immediately, and they decided to fight their way back to their own lines. They were going to travel fast. They were damned if they’d surrender. They shook hands all around. They called themselves “The Three Musketeers” (Vonnegut 53).

Weary’s narration is in stark contrast to Billy’s. Weary hides behind the guise of the abstract, embellishing only those traits which society has deemed acceptable: bravery, glory, and honorable victory, while Billy, on the other hand does not attempt to disguise his fear and dislike of war. Vonnegut’s tone also suggests the immaturity of Weary’s mindset – he speaks in short, basic sentences, and calls Weary part of “The Three Musketeers” – a reference to a child’s story. Vonnegut’s tone suggests the naivety of an attitude such as Weary’s, and by extension, the juvenile romanticism of war. Vonnegut could have simply rejected the practice of sensationalism in his own writings; however, he goes a step further and instead includes both perspectives in his story. In doing so, we can see the contrast between the two different types of war writing, with Weary’s testimony serving to represent sensationalist fiction and Billy’s testimony to represent Vonnegut’s own take on how to tell a “true war story.”

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut also recognizes and directly addresses the societal tendency to “frame” war in a way that is appealing. During a visit to Bernard V. O’Hare, an old war colleague, to help collect memories for his great anti-war novel the narrator (assumed to be Vonnegut) encounters O’Hare’s angry wife, Mary. She accuses Vonnegut of looking to glorify war in his novel and make it somehow romanticized. Angry, she yells at Vonnegut and her husband, “You were just babies in the war – like the ones upstairs!?” (Vonnegut 18). Vonnegut agrees, thinking to himself, “We *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (Vonnegut 18). Mary, still enraged at the idea of another sensationalized account of the war, continues to accuse him:

But you’re not going to write it that way are you... You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs (Vonnegut 18).

This idea of “framing” war is represented in the novel by literal “frames” – eyeglass frames, that is. Vonnegut, in Chapter Two makes a remark that “Frames are where the money is” (Vonnegut 31) – suggesting that it is not the lens (which allows for corrected sight), but rather the superficial “frames” which society values. Later, after Billy has written his newspaper article describing his findings on Tralfamadore, Vonnegut writes that Billy “was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing correctives lenses for Earthling souls” (Vonnegut 36). Just as Billy is attempting to restore accurate “sight” to all Earthlings in his article, Vonnegut, too, is attempting to restore an accurate vision of war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.



### In Our Time and Memory

We would chuckle or grin sometimes, as though war stories were coming back, but neither one of us could remember anything good.

– Kurt Vonnegut  
*Slaughterhouse-Five*

War, at its essence, is trauma. The study of traumatic events and their lasting effects on victims remains a popular research topic across a variety of academic disciplines, literature included. In their writings, Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien work to demonstrate the way in which trauma informs human thought. Exposure to trauma often results in the victim's constant replaying of an event in a desperate attempt to find meaning and understanding. As Cathy Caruth argues in her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1996):

The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives...often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival (Caruth 7).

*In Our Time*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *The Things They Carried* are three examples of war literature which demonstrate this idea of an oscillating "double telling." All three of these texts, while working to authentically portray the violence of the war experience, show an equally conscious emphasis on presenting the lasting effects of that violence, especially on soldiers post-combat. In an effort to demonstrate the lasting effects of war trauma on the human psyche, Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien experimented with

time and memory in their writings, taking creative approaches to elements such as structure, linearity, temporal continuity, unity, and psychological projection. In doing so, these authors were able to reflect both the fragmentary and jarring nature of war, as well as demonstrate the inescapable effects of such a trauma.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* can be successfully read in one of two ways: as a series of stand-alone short stories, or as a collective, unified narrative. Of the twenty-two chapters in the novel, several were published alone before the publication of the novel, including "The Things They Carried," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "The Ghost Soldiers," and "The Lives of the Dead." Each short story in the novel is complete in and of itself; however, the repetition of characters, themes, and events throughout chapters ties the collection together as a complete narrative.

By writing in short, episodic chapters, O'Brien alludes to the fragmentary and nonlinear nature of human memory:

I wanted to write a book that wasn't completely linear. Linearity is true, I guess, in the world that we live in...But when you look back on your life, a day later or ten years later, you forget what came first, and what came second, and what came third. You forget the linearity...I have this character looking back on his war many years afterward and he remembers the way you and I would. He remembers corpses, events, the day a man died, but much will have been erased from memory. You're left with little snapshots – little tiny movies in our memories, and then blankness (Interview 4-5).

For O'Brien, using episodic chapters creates a more accurate depiction of memory than a straightforward, linear narrative. In the case of *The Things They Carried*, the form shapes the content. This episodic approach to time gives each story more weight than if it were part of a linear narrative because each story, in addition to contributing to the overall novel, must also be able to stand alone. Because there is not a clear, linear, traditional narrative storyline present across the collection of memories, the greater takeaway from the novel is the memories' *combined* emotional weight.

This creates a unique challenge for O'Brien – how does an author working with this particular narrative structure and treatment of time decide what *is* and what *is not* a meaningful contribution to the story? As O'Brien states, this is accomplished by only including relevant, emotionally potent, and powerful scenes in the novel:

If you think back to when you were a little kid, you might remember playing in your sandbox or eating chicken at the dinner table one day, but you don't remember getting to the dinner table or who called you, probably. Most of it is erased. And so I wanted to structure the book, or have a form of the book, where it wasn't linear. These are the memories of this character – looking out on the river and seeing the mountains and knowing you must go across the river and go into the mountains and maybe die – that's going to be memorable. But if you'll notice, I didn't have in the book the actual march into the mountains – it's not there. They're just in the mountains and Rat Kiley is killing a baby water buffalo. Everything else has been erased. (Interview 5).

Working with a nonlinear narrative strategy, every word on the page has to be significant, as does every scene and “memory” included. O’Brien does not bother explaining how each and every soldier came to arrive in Vietnam, or recount their entire life story. Instead, he writes in “snapshots” – stringing together only Tim (character)’s most significant memories. Where a traditional linear narrative form must take the time to explain details such as how a character moves from Point A to Point B in order to provide linear coherence, O’Brien’s nonlinear and fragmented narrative form can forego irrelevant scenes because the end goal is not to recreate a journey from beginning to end. Rather, O’Brien is trying to demonstrate how Tim looks back on his war experiences years later – by recalling only the most powerful memories, the memories that have stood the test of time and which, for him, have come to define his war experience.

In addition, by rejecting a linear narrative, O’Brien frees himself from the confining structure of a traditional story arc. War is unpredictable and erratic, with trauma and violence possible at any moment, not merely at the climax of the story. By implementing an episodic treatment of time and memory, O’Brien releases himself from necessary escalation of linear narratives, and instead, can more authentically portray the unpredictability of war. Furthermore, *The Things They Carried* does not maintain temporal continuity – that is, the story does not proceed with forward motion, beginning with the most distant event and incrementally approaching the present with each succeeding event. Rather, *The Things They Carried* is arbitrary in its sense of linear time – stories jump from the present to the past and back again with seemingly no sense of regulation. This nonlinear strategy, which disregards temporal continuity, can be disruptive to the reader – and that is the point. The active, nonlinear structure not only

communicates the unpredictability of war, but also demonstrates the disruptive nature of war both during combat and for years to come. O'Brien (both character and author) cannot go about his life in the present, without constantly being dragged back to the past.

Throughout the novel, O'Brien uses direct discourse to openly discuss Tim's (and presumably his own) struggles to shake the trauma of his war memories. In the final chapter of the novel, "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien writes:

I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world (O'Brien 213).

In the direct, forthright style which has come to define his work, O'Brien explains that, even decades later, he has still not shaken the trauma of Vietnam. He spends the remainder of "The Lives of the Dead" discussing his reactions to various deaths in his life, from that of his first love, Linda, at age nine, to his fellow members of Alpha Company, such as Ted Lavender and Kiowa. O'Brien laments, and explains the necessity of stories as a coping mechanism for death and for life:

The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness...That's what a story does. The bodies are animated. You make the dead talk (219).

For O'Brien, writing and stories are a means of comprehending the various traumas which haunt him to this day. O'Brien does not resist this truth or attempt to portray an unrealistic bravery, but rather embraces his pain, acknowledging its constancy as a natural part of the war experience. By including chapters in the novel which demonstrate Tim's emotional struggles, not just during, but for years after Vietnam, O'Brien creates a more authentic telling of the war, and human, experience.

Of the three novels, none takes more creative liberty with time and memory than Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the foundation of which is a non-linear narrative treatment of time. The novel is written in ten untitled, numbered chapters. These chapters are filled with short, episodic vignettes, most only a few paragraphs long, and separated by ellipses. More often than not, these vignettes are non-linear in their order and do not maintain temporal continuity throughout the chapters. Rather, at first glance, they appear randomly arranged; the reader is pulled without warning from the present to the past, to an alien planet and back again with no apparent rhyme or reason, and without following any predominant, continuous storyline.

Because there is no preeminent storyline, the reader's understanding of Billy's trauma at Dresden comes from the greater sum of each vignette when read all together. In an interview with Frank McLaughlin in 1973, Vonnegut explained that, "My books are essentially mosaics, thousands and thousands of tiny chips all glued together..." (Allen 69). This philosophy can be seen at the beginning of Chapter Five, when protagonist Billy Pilgrim describes the way Tralfamadorians read and write. "Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could see how the books were laid out – in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars" (Vonnegut 111). This first initial description of

Tralfamadorian books is actually meant as a commentary on the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Each of the “brief clumps of symbols” is really referring to each of the different vignettes in the novel. Billy even goes as far as to say they are “separated by stars,” just as the novel’s vignettes are each separated by ellipses. Billy continues to strengthen the link between Tralfamadorian books and *Slaughterhouse-Five* when he notes the way in which Tralfamadorians read these books:

...each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time (Vonnegut 112).

It is clear that when Vonnegut is describing Tralfamadorian books, he is really describing what he hoped to achieve with his own book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Each “brief, urgent message” is, of course, each vignette in the novel, and there is no relationship that connects each vignette other than the fact that author Vonnegut chose them so that when read all together, they would produce a recounting of war that is “beautiful and surprising and deep.” By drawing upon a non-linear narrative structure with “no beginning, no middle, no end,” Vonnegut crafts a novel that authentically reflects the way the human mind and memory works.

Vonnegut demonstrates a preoccupation with “simultaneous time,” both as an author and as a person. As he said in 1973 to Standish, “You are here as a child and as an old man” – suggesting his philosophy that human experience is recalled constantly and concurrently (Allen 77). Thus, Vonnegut’s portrayal of “simultaneous time” implies the inescapable torment of trauma, the effects of which are felt at every moment in time for the remainder of the person’s life.

There are several narrative techniques which Vonnegut employs in order to communicate this notion, the first of which is *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s unique tripartite storyline, or rather story-map, as Vonnegut’s novel can hardly be described as linear in any way. The collection of vignettes can be sorted into three broad categories: Billy Pilgrim’s present life as an optometrist in Ilium, his war memories from his past experiences at Dresden, and his space travels to the planet Tralfamadore where he has been abducted and is being kept prisoner. These three types of vignettes each piece together a different side of one man’s war experience much the way that many different, multi-colored pieces of glass come together in a mosaic to form one collective image.

Billy’s present life in Ilium serves as an anchor point for the novel, against which stand both the time-travel to Dresden and the Tralfamadorian escapades. The two other vignette collections each serve their own purpose to the novel’s collective understanding of experience and memory. Billy’s uncontrollable time travel instances represent the lasting trauma of war. He is continually dragged back to his past and forced against his will to relive his war experiences over and over again. This is meant to reflect the post-traumatic memories that soldiers must live with for the rest of their lives – intrusive and uncontrollable memories that drag these soldiers back to the past time and time again. In



one such vignette, Billy is thrown through time back to the war where he is a passenger riding in a boxcar crossing through Germany. Billy tries to find a spot to lie down and sleep, but is quickly confronted by another soldier who loudly yells for Billy to “Get the hell out of here” because of the fact that, in his sleep, Billy yells, kicks, and whimpers (Vonnegut 99). Billy’s time travel is completely involuntary, and so by pulling Billy back to a scene that illustrates the very horrors which haunt him, Vonnegut demonstrates the inescapable nature of post-war trauma.

The Tralfamadorian vignettes also serve as a commentary on coping with the effects of war trauma; however, they do so differently than the time-travel incidents. Billy’s assumed “hallucinations” on Tralfamadore represent a coping mechanism that Billy has invented in order to escape to a world where he is free from the trauma of Dresden. The two types of “science-fiction” vignettes actually complement one another – with the time-travel episodes demonstrating how memories of war are inescapable, involuntary, and never ceasing, and the Tralfamadorian episodes demonstrating a traumatized soldier’s desperate attempt to escape those same memories of war which ceaselessly torment him. One of the most commonly asked questions about *Slaughterhouse-Five* is whether or not Billy really is abducted by aliens, or whether Tralfamadore – a place without free-will, free from guilt, and where inhabitants can repeatedly relive their favorite memories – is actually just an invention of Billy’s imagination. In truth, the answer is irrelevant, as Tralfamadore represents an escape for Billy either way.

The interpretation of Billy’s hallucinations to Tralfamadore as a self-created coping mechanism is largely due to Vonnegut’s description of Tralfamadorian time.

Tralfamadorians view all moments of time simultaneously. In Chapter Four, one Tralfamadorian takes the time to explain this interpretation of time to Billy:

“I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber”

“You sound to me as though you don’t believe in free will,” said Billy Pilgrim (Vonnegut 109).

By writing a novel with a structure that negates time, Vonnegut can open a dialogue about the existence of free will and how humans cope with trauma. If all time is stretched out in front of the Tralfamadorians, then it can be assumed that the future is already written, with all events predestined – rejecting the concept of free will. This debate between free will and fatalism is discussed in Neil D. Isaacs’s, “Unstuck in Time: Clockwork Orange and Slaughterhouse-Five” (1973). Isaacs argues that:

If the self-assertiveness of humanity inevitably leads to war, the alternative is a kind of sublime acceptance of everything...The Tralfamadorian response to death and destruction, however violent, pointless, mindless, brutal, or unnecessary, is, “So it goes.”...That the alternative to war is acceptance of everything as structured – including war – is, then, a very bitter irony (Isaacs).

By suggesting that the alternative to war is an acceptance of fatalism, Vonnegut presents a satirical portrait of humanity’s own coping mechanisms for trauma. Isaacs observes the

repetition of the Serenity prayer throughout the novel, which states, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to tell the difference” (Vonnegut 267). Billy’s seeking of serenity through an alien race is representative of humanity’s seeking of serenity through organized religion. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not fatalistic at all, but rather uses Tralfamadorian time as a means of representing the futility of humanity’s ironic “serenity” when it comes to death and destruction. As Isaac notes:

Those who see the book as fatalistic have been either beguiled by its potential for humor directed at human society or seduced by the satirical nihilism it seems to share with Kubrick” (Isaacs).

The depiction of Tralfamadorian Time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* represents the irony of the human coping process for trauma: humans cling to the idea of serenity – accepting things they “cannot change” as a means of making peace with an otherwise incomprehensible trauma. And yet, simultaneously, by accepting this serenity – that is, accepting war as something which cannot be changed – humans ironically also refute the idea of free will, and thus, relinquish any ability to place judgment on trauma. As Isaacs argues, there exists an ironic dissonance “between Vonnegut’s need to condemn the destruction of Dresden and Billy’s call to spread the Tralfamadorian word of fatalism” (Isaacs). In his construction of Tralfamadorian time, Vonnegut satirizes the simultaneous desire of humans to condemn acts of violence and destruction while simultaneously relinquishing any responsibility for said violence and destruction by means of false serenity.

The Tralfamadorian interpretation of time also affects the Tralfamadorian interpretation of death. As Billy explains in a letter he writes about his time on Tralfamadore:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist...When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "So it goes" (Vonnegut 33-34).

Because of Tralfamadorian time, Billy can take solace in the fact that those harmed and killed in Dresden, and in all tragedies, are not really gone, but very much alive in different moments of their lives. We can see that, regardless of the absolute existence of the Tralfamadorians, that Billy has internalized this sentiment, as the phrase "So it goes" follows every death in the novel, regardless of what time period Billy is speaking from. This idea of simultaneous time is reflected in the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. By jumping sporadically from one time period to another, Vonnegut is attempting, within the limitations of human language, to create a fictionalized account of Tralfamadorian time, and thus, desensitizes the reader to death while ironically and simultaneously drawing attention to death's omnipresence.

Hemingway's *In Our Time* evokes a question of time right from its title and rejects temporal unity as a means to greater objectivity. That is, the collection maintains no consistent treatment of time throughout. While there are certainly minor continuities (for example, the character Nick Adams populates eight of the sixteen short stories), there exists no *single* character or storyline which connects each element of the collection. Rather, the unity which ties the collection together is a notion of the senseless, incomprehensible, and ever-present violence "in our time."

Hemingway's rejection of a singular timeline in favor of a collection told from multiple vantage points works as a means of juxtaposing the violence of war with the violence of everyday life in order to create the portrait of a "complete" world. Hemingway accomplishes this juxtaposition by alternating between short stories of varying content, each of which present an intimate account of either war or quotidian violence, and vignettes, which present the opposite: an emotionless and unfamiliar account of foreign violence:

Hemingway wrote to Edmund Wilson that the effect was meant "to give the picture of the whole between examining it in detail. Like looking with your eyes at something, say a passing coastline, and then looking at it with 15X binoculars. Or rather, maybe, looking at it and then going in and living in it – and then coming out and looking at it again (S. Hemingway xxxi).

It is this combination of close-examination in the short stories and removed-perspective in the vignettes that allows Hemingway to authentically portray a world unified by the constant trauma of war and in life, and humanity's desperate attempt to find

understanding and meaning within that chaos. Had Hemingway limited himself to a straightforward linearity told from the perspective of one individual, he would have fallen short of the collection's greater achievement: a portrait of society's struggle as a whole to comprehend the trauma of violence in both war and the everyday.

The nuanced idea of "unity" within *In Our Time* is examined at great length in Clinton S. Burhans, Jr's critical essay, "The Complex Unity of *In Our Time*." With regards to the specific linear order of the stories and vignettes, Burhans asserts that the multiple republications of the collection, each new edition witnessing slight changes and additions, is evidence that "Hemingway was getting at something more coherent and significant than a simple anthology of loosely related stories and sketches" (Burhans 89). And yet, on that same note, Burhans maintains that "it is wasted effort to seek any one-for-one relationship between the vignettes and the individual stories" (Burhans 89) and even goes as far as to say that attempting to do so would "belittle Hemingway's intention and achievement in the vignette" (Burhans 89). What then is the "pretty good unity" of which Hemingway speaks in his famous 1924 letter to Edmund Wilson?

While one cannot reduce Hemingway's structure to a simplistic relationship between the vignettes and the short stories, one can also not discard the arrangement as merely haphazard or circumstantial. Burhans argues that both the vignettes and the short stories are ordered "in a subtle and significant structure" in and of themselves, for example, within the vignettes:

...the first seven are concerned with war; the next one with crime; the next six with bullfighting; the following one with crime and the last one with war. From war to crime to bullfighting to crime to war – the pattern is

definite and balanced; moreover, it suggests a unifying theme. By surrounding bullfighting with war and crime, Hemingway places violence and death on which man imposes order and meaning at the center of a world of chaotic disorder and violence, thus implying subtly that from the first – bullfighting – he can learn something about the second – the world – and how to live in it (Burhans 90).

Burhans argues for a similar progression-regression pattern of unity in the arrangement of the short stories, claiming:

From youth to maturity, from innocence to experience, from peace to war to peace again, and from America to Europe and back to America, he exposes a central consciousness...to the basic realities of the world and the human condition. Like the vignettes, too, the subtle structural design of the stories reflects a unifying theme and one which develops in detail and from several perspectives the theme suggested by the vignettes: man, particularly contemporary American man, must face up to the world and the human condition as they really are and then cope with the problem of living as a human being in such a world (Burhans 91).

Rather than approaching time as a measurement of elapsed minutes and years, Hemingway approached time with the idea of exposing a cyclical pattern in man's development – a maturation towards a comprehension of a violent world. The order of both the vignettes and the short stories in *In Our Time* suggest the dissonance between the collection's violent content and the collection's peace-evoking title, further

emphasizing humankind's desperate attempt to project order and meaning onto a violently chaotic world.

In contrast, many critics argue that the idea of conventional "unity" cannot be accurately applied to *In Our Time*. In "Continuities and Discontinuities of Form: *In Our Time* as Modernist Achievement," Matthew Stewart explains that the common practice of "many readers to try to view the volume solely through the traditional narrative paradigms" stems from Hemingway's "insistence on unity" found in many quotes and writings by the author, such as the famed Edmund Wilson letter (Stewart 32). Rather, Stewart proposes the use of the term "complexity" to describe the collection's unique combination of short stories and vignettes, "for the volume paradoxically carries the feel of fragmentation and indeterminacy while retaining a high degree of interrelatedness" (Stewart 32). This idea of being both fragmentary and simultaneously unified only further speaks to the idea that Hemingway's inclusion of both the short stories and the vignettes serves to demonstrate the juxtaposition between war and the quotidian, as well as the juxtaposition of inescapable trauma with a desperate desire for peace. In fact, Stewart goes as far as to argue that, "it is the vignettes that turn the volume from a partly realized example of a unified story sequence into a casebook of modernist juxtapository techniques" (Stewart 32). Much like O'Brien and Vonnegut, Hemingway writes in juxtaposed opposites: in unified fragments, which only together can portray a cohesive whole.

Hemingway in particular demonstrates an interest in the effects of trauma, with several of the short stories of *In Our Time* centering on the struggle of a soldier to adapt to life post-war, and specifically, in dealing with the inescapable nature of their war



memories. “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I” and “Big Two-Hearted River: Part II” follow a young Nick Adams, who has recently returned from war, and who has just disembarked from a baggage car in the town of Seney, Michigan, with which it is implied that Nick is familiar. The first paragraph of the short story is Nick’s initial impression of present-day Seney, which he describes as recently having undergone severe fire damage and physical trauma. As Nick notes:

There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground (Hemingway 209).

A discussion of trauma is at the heart of these two interconnected short stories, although it is never forthrightly mentioned. In order to communicate Nick’s internal struggles, Hemingway makes use of an objective correlative, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot). In an attempt to communicate Nick’s own inability to yet fully comprehend his own war trauma, Hemingway projects Nick’s emotions onto objects – communicating the emotions of Nick’s trauma without reducing the experience by means of directly naming or attempting to describe the trauma.

The use of Seney as an objective correlative serves to set the emotional lens through which the rest of the narrative will be interpreted – a comparison between the

time before and after a trauma. However, Hemingway's specific language in this passage suggests multi-dimensional damage and illuminates a deeper understanding of Nick's pre and post-war experiences.

Though it is never explicitly stated that "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I" and "Big Two-Hearted River: Part II" are about war, there is enough suggestion in the objective correlatives that the reader comes to understand Nick's battle without it needing to be forthrightly noted. Hemingway affirms this in his posthumously published memoir, *A Moveable Feast* (1964): "The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it" (Hemingway 76). Nick begins the novel's opening passage by referencing the once thriving, jovial nature of Seney when he says that there were once thirteen saloons. However, he immediately strikes down that sentiment by juxtaposing an image of life and energy with an image of death and destruction when he says that the fire-damage to Seney had left not a trace of the saloons. This statement, though serving to establish the narrative's setting, is actually about Nick and his adjustment to life post-trauma. Nick Adams and the town of Seney are one. He, too, was once full of life, but the trauma of war, like the fire trauma of Seney, has left him broken and destroyed. This is further illustrated as the passage continues to describe the ruins of the town: "The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney" (Hemingway 209). This is true for Nick as well as for Seney. There is just enough of the old Nick left that he is physically recognizable – just as Nick can recognize the old foundations of the Mansion House hotel – however, he has changed completely. All that

remains of Seney are a few physical remnants, just as his physical shell is all that is left of the old Nick Adams.

Over the course of the two halves of “Big-Two Hearted River,” Nick leaves Seney and hikes through the woods to an old favorite fishing spot, where he makes a camp and spends the rest of the following day fishing. As Nick is walking through the woods, he notices that the local grasshoppers are black, instead of the usual green. Nick makes a special point to note that these were not an exotic species of black grasshoppers, but that they “were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color” (Hemingway 211). Hemingway’s grasshoppers are meant to represent the coping process. Nick realizes that the grasshoppers have adapted, adjusting their color in order to camouflage to the desecrated landscape. Nick, too, has changed in order to adapt to his own violent landscape. In the last sentence of this passage, Nick “wondered how long they would stay that way.” This final musing is representative of Nick’s own question of whether or not he will ever return to the person he was before he went to war.

The two most significant objective correlatives in “Big Two-Hearted River” are that of the river and the swamp. The river is representative of life and of healing – Nick drinks sustaining water from the river, the river is surrounded by rich green fauna, and the river supplies Nick with several large, hearty fish. In addition, the nature of the river is clear, and clean, and constantly flowing and changing. The river is a symbol of purity and of life for Nick – the exact opposite of the swamp. The swamp lies ahead of where Nick fishes for trout, and every time he mentions the swamp, he reacts with severe anxiety. It is outright said that “he did not feel like going on into the swamp.” In addition, the physical description of the swamp evokes similar anxiety:

In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure (Hemingway 231).

Hemingway's description of the swamp is noticeably opposite his description of the river. The swamp is a dark place, where sunlight (evocative of life and happiness) can seldom enter. In addition, Hemingway's repetition of the word "tragic" further reinforces a connection between the swamp and the tragedy of war.

In "Big Two-Hearted River," the swamp is representative of Nick facing his war demons. Every mention of the swamp is riddled with anxiety, and the end of the story shows Nick returning to the river and dismissing the internal pressure he feels to face the swamp, saying "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp" (Hemingway 232). Hemingway uses these images of nature to suggest the struggle a soldier faces to adapt to life post-war. The river, with its ever-flowing and ever-changing nature naturally moves Nick towards a point where he must face his war memories – represented by the swamp. There are several instances in the narrative where Nick even discusses the forceful forward movement of the river's current, such as when he explains: "you had to wallow against the current and in a deep place, the water piled up on you. It was no fun to fish upstream with this much current" (Hemingway 229). We can see by Nick's fighting of the river's current that he is resisting moving toward a place where he must face the swamp. In addition, the fact that the river flows right into the swamp, and presumably, continues only after passing through the swamp, suggests that Nick can find true healing only after he has faced his war memories.

## So It Goes...

They wrote in the old days that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. But in modern war there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like a dog for no good reason.

– Ernest Hemingway

*Notes on the Next War: A Serious Topical Letter*

Death and violence are an intrinsic component of the war experience. Interwoven into the fabric of war, it is impossible to examine such without simultaneously considering death and violence. Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien recognized this inescapability of violence, both in war as well as in life, and worked to incorporate this into their war literature, each calling attention to the pervasiveness of death and violence while also demonstrating an acceptance of its inevitability. To achieve this representation of death and violence, Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien turned again to unconventional narrative techniques, the end result being a literary style marked by such characteristics as emotional detachment, irony, and black humor.

The development of his now-lauded experimental prose, which *In Our Time* epitomizes, stemmed from Ernest Hemingway's recognition of the "wide gulf between language and experience" (Tetlow 20) and the inability of war and of violence to be portrayed authentically by conventional prose techniques. The complicated publication history of *In Our Time* is testament Hemingway's struggle with the inadequacy of language to capture the experience of violence. In its earliest published form, *In Our Time* was simply six short vignettes – the first six – which were written between January and March of 1923 and which Hemingway submitted to the literary magazine *Little Review* for initial publication in its "Exiles" issue (Cohen 36-37). Ultimately, "in our time" was selected as the title to connect the young writer's six short pieces, which dealt

primarily with scenes of violence; however, before this decision was made, Hemingway considered several alternative titles, one of which was “Unwritten Stories Are Better” (Cohen 36-37). In *Hemingway’s Laboratory: The Paris in our time* (2003), Milton A. Cohen argues that this early attempt at a title speaks to Hemingway’s recognition of traditional prose conventions as a fundamentally inadequate method for creating authentic representations of war and violence:

“Unwritten” suggests “un-writerly,” stories that are not stories, shorn of the narrative conventions of traditional, “written” fiction: beginnings and endings, development of plot and characters, rising action and climax. In place of the “written” story is a fragment – the modernist form that best captures the ontology of modern experience (Cohen 37).

As noted earlier, Hemingway’s writing of *In Our Time* was influenced by the time he spent in Paris, surrounded by expatriate Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, where a central focus was on “un-writing” stories, that is, on rejecting traditional “written” fiction in favor of new techniques that more authentically portrayed the modern world. It was this desire to forge a new way to write about war and violence that drove Hemingway to take creative risks in his prose, and to experiment with fundamental literary elements such as voice, style, and tone in order to create a more authentic portrait of the inherent violence of the human experience.

Hemingway is most famously known for his minimalist prose and bare-bones writing style. Many argue that Hemingway’s now trademark style emerged from his time spent working as a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*, whose style guide begins, “Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English” (KansasCity.com), and

which Hemingway once claimed “were the best rules I ever learned for the business of writing... No man with any talent, who feels and writes truly about the thing he is trying to say, can fail to write well if he abides with them” (Kansas City Times). Hemingway left *The Kansas City Star* a year later to serve as an Ambulance Driver for the Italian Army in World War I – the experience of which would inspire several of the short stories and vignettes of *In Our Time*. Following a return to the United States in 1919, Hemingway continued his journalism career as a foreign correspondent for *The Toronto Star*, his last job before he would completely devote himself to writing. *In Our Time*, published six years after his return, was Hemingway’s first publication as a “serious” writer, and his first publication post-journalism career. The temporal proximity between Hemingway’s journalism career and his authorship of *In Our Time* resulted in a prose style highly influenced by journalistic style, not surprising for a writer who:

...in 1923, still earned his bread as a journalist. Hemingway built on his professional experience to fashion narratives that give the *feel* of journalistic reporting, but are not. Their sentences state facts without inflection and seem to avoid emotive rhetoric – “objective” devices that in fact exceeded journalistic norms of the time (Cohen 62).

It is this “quasi-journalistic style,” that Hemingway used to “achieve literary ends” (Cohen 62), creating the raw portrayal of the human experience which has come to define both early Hemingway, as well as *In Our Time* as a whole.

His journalistic writing style was Hemingway’s solution to the problem of the inadequacy of conventional language to capture the experience of violence. This style effectively accomplishes two things. First, it increases the intensity and the narrative pace

of *In Our Time*, specifically among the vignettes. The vast majority of these vignettes are action-focused and often violent in nature. In keeping with *The Kansas City Star Style Guide*, Hemingway often writes about action using short, direct sentences in order to keep the pace quick, jarring, and fragmentary. In the vignette titled “Chapter III,” for example, the average sentence is only roughly nine words long, with the narration seeming to merely be a laundry list of actions:

We were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. (Hemingway 106).

This adherence to a journalistic writing style allowed Hemingway to structure his prose style to most authentically represent the feel of war – the rapid-fire, action-oriented feel of combat. This is further exacerbated by the fact that many of Hemingway’s vignettes begin *in media res*, only adding to the disorienting feeling that accompanies being dropped into the middle of violent action. These short snapshots of violence are meant as brief glimpses into the unpredictability of combat, and in this way, both the content and the style of Hemingway’s writing suggest the fragmentary, jarring nature of war.

The second thing that Hemingway’s “quasi-journalistic” style accomplished was a deconstruction and reconstruction of the reader’s emotional response to violence. Hemingway’s vignettes are, for the most part, action rather than emotionally focused, addressing “violent actions that have just occurred...or are occurring...or are just about to occur” (Cohen 65). Rather than forthrightly naming emotions in his writing, and thus detracting from the experiential purity by attempting to describe said emotions,



Hemingway uses actions to create an original emotional response in the reader. As Cohen writes:

Their phlegmatic tone and factuality heighten the tension and the shock of the violence in complementary ways. First, they strip the reader of psychological buffers against violence that conventional treatments provide through sentimentality, clichés, euphemisms, explanations, and indirect reference...Hemingway realized that, regarding emotion, that less is more: the less emotive the prose, the greater the tension, as the reader's imagination supplies the unstated dread (Cohen 65-68).

This stripping of “psychological buffers” reverts back to Hemingway's fundamental aim to tell “true war stories,” an ambition that would prove increasingly difficult given that a glorification of war in the media had become commonplace. In order to communicate the same “shock” at the violence in his writings, Hemingway had to revert to new strategies of language, for conventional prose techniques no longer carried the emotional impact that Hemingway sought in his work. By writing about war using action-based narration devoid of emotion, Hemingway makes the reader present in the narrative, resulting in an authentic and genuine emotional response. As Michael Reynolds writes in *Hemingway: The Paris Years*, “If action is presented truly, precisely, using only its essential elements, then readers, without being told, will respond emotionally as the writer intended” (Reynolds 31). This idea – that action, not commentary or narration, is what generates emotion in the reader – aligned perfectly with young Hemingway's journalistic writing style, and now has come to define the author's early prose style.

Many critics and writers alike, including poet Ezra Pound (whom Hemingway himself admired), recognized a relationship between Hemingway's perspective – his confrontation of the random, senseless violence of this new modern world – and his writing style. In "Modernist Eruptions," Margot Norris argues that Hemingway "used a disciplined, muscular, classical style to redeem the fragmentation, loss of value, and chaos both symptomized and produced by the war" (Elliot 318). Hemingway's bare-bones, journalistic prose style demonstrates the author's attempt to impose order onto an otherwise senselessly violent and incomprehensible world.

Hemingway's use of irony in *In Our Time* truly reflects the author's desire to deconstruct romanticized ideals of war and violence. This sense of irony is present from the reader's first encounter with the collection: as previously noted, the title "In Our Time," is borrowed from a verse in the English Book of Common Prayer which reads "Give us peace in our time, O Lord." The dissonance between the notion of peace suggested by the title, and the examination of violence to follow works to ironically demonstrate humankind's desperate desire to impose order and meaning onto a senselessly violent and meaningless world. This same sense of irony is reflected in the collection's structure as well. In "Hemingway's Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony" (1956), E.M. Halliday argues that *In Our Time*'s structure speaks to the collection's greater ironic purpose:

...what Hemingway did was to take the numbered sketches of *in our time* (Paris, 1924) and intersperse them with the longer stories to give a powerfully ironic effect of spurious order supporting the book's subject: modern civil disruption and violence seen against the timeless background

of everyday human cross-purposes...The ironic gap between expectation and fulfilment, pretense and fact, intention and action, the message sent and the message received, the way things are thought or ought to be and the way things are – this has been Hemingway’s great theme from the beginning; and it has called for an ironic method to do it artistic justice (Halliday 15).

This sense of irony as it relates to war and to violence is the principal achievement of the collection and the differentiating agent responsible for the collection’s staying power. It is this sense of violent irony which Hemingway carefully incorporated into the foundation of the collection through *In Our Time*’s title and structure. Furthermore, by highlighting this “ironic gap” in his prose, Hemingway simultaneously accentuates and deconstructs a glorified ideal of war.

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a work known explicitly for its dark and dramatic use of irony as a means of addressing the ever-present nature of war and violence. Vonnegut, like Hemingway, implemented several experimental literary techniques in his war writings including an ironic tone and a dark and satirical treatment of humor. Vonnegut recognized the inadequacy of traditional literary conventions to authentically discuss war, and he sought a conscious break from this tradition in favor of new techniques. As he said in an interview with the *Paris Review* in 1977:

I think it can be tremendously refreshing if a creator of literature has something on his mind other than the history of literature so far. Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak (Paris Review).

Vonnegut's conscious desire to create something new – a new way of examining the violence of war – inspired the piece of literature that ultimately became *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a text that pushes the limits of literary tradition with the ultimate goal of deconstructing romanticized American war novels.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is saturated with irony, with its influence found in both the novel's content and in its treatment of language. Vonnegut uses this irony as a means of drawing attention to the constancy of violence and death. In terms of content, there are countless events in the novel where Vonnegut draws a distinction between the expectation and reality. For example, in Chapter Two, Vonnegut tells the backstory of the character Roland Weary, a young soldier who was new to war – having just been assigned as a replacement for a gun crew. In one such vignette, Vonnegut describes a particularly ironic moment from Weary's early days in war:

Weary was as new to war as Billy. He was a replacement, too. As part of a gun crew, he had helped to fire one shot in anger – from a 57-millimeter antitank gun. The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of a zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The gun lapped up snow and vegetation with a blowtorch thirty feet long. The flame left a black arrow on the ground, showing the Germans exactly where the gun was hidden. The shot was a miss.

What had been missed was a Tiger tank. It swiveled its 88-millimeter snout around sniffingly, saw the arrow on the ground. It fired. It killed everybody on the gun crew but Weary. So it goes (Vonnegut 43-44).

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, the irony is unmistakable – Vonnegut has created a scene where the “gulf” between expectation and reality is incredibly broad. Weary, the man responsible for causing the event that alerted the Germans to his crew’s location, is the only soldier to have survived the attack that was entirely his fault. This passage demonstrates one of the central ironic themes of the novel: the arbitrary nature of death and destruction in war. All humanity is prey to death’s erratic strike, and in war, no one is immune, no one is ever, truly safe, regardless of rank or station, whether at fault or inculpable. Death is impartial. It is by imbuing his fiction with ironic images demonstrating the seemingly random occurrence of death that Vonnegut was able to paint a picture of the senselessness of war.

This passage also uses ironic tone and language to suggest the omnipresence of death. After Vonnegut mentions the death of Weary’s crew, he ends the vignette with the short phrase, “So it goes” (44). This phrase follows every single death in the novel, a seemingly inappropriate response given the resigned, passive nature of the phrase. However, by drawing attention to every loss of life in the novel and dismissing it with “so it goes,” Vonnegut ironically highlights the inescapable nature of death and its constant presence in both war and in life.

In addition to irony, Vonnegut’s narrative tone is also characterized by a lack of emotion. Like Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, Vonnegut often presents disturbingly graphic images of war carnage without any warning, and certainly without use of any of the literary techniques that Cohen would argue serve as “psychological buffers” for the reader, namely the use of “sentimentality, clichés, euphemisms, explanations, and indirect reference” (Cohen 65-68). In this way, by directly presenting the unsettling

events of war in a tone altogether devoid of emotion, Vonnegut forces the reader not only to face the violent realities of war without, as Hemingway would say, “blinking,” but also to formulate their own emotional response without any prior guidance or instruction by the narrator. In Chapter Three, Billy has been traveling with Roland Weary and two scouts, the latter of which are skilled soldiers and adequately prepared for war. After Billy grows sick and after Weary tries to help him continue along, the two scouts decide to abandon Billy and Weary because they no longer want “to wait for them anymore” (Vonnegut 62). Not long after, Billy and Weary encounter German troops and are taken prisoner, and the reader learns the final fate of the scouts:

Three inoffensive *bangs* came from far away. They came from German rifles. The two scouts who had ditched Billy and Weary had just been shot. They had been lying in ambush for Germans. They had been discovered and shot from behind. Now they were dying in the snow, feeling nothing, turning the snow to the color of raspberry sherbet. So it goes (Vonnegut 68-69).

Not only does this passage suggest irony in that Billy, the least skilled soldier, survived while the highly trained scouts did not, but it is also completely devoid of narrator emotion. In fact, had an unknowing reader encountered this passage, it reads almost identically to several of the vignettes of *In Our Time*. The sentences, which are short and fragmented, are focused almost entirely on action. In this way, the reader is forced to directly confront a scene of graphic war violence and create an original emotional response. If both Hemingway and Vonnegut, two of the most highly regarded war writers

of the twentieth century, believed in the power of action-oriented prose bare of any delineated emotion by the narrator, then certainly it must be significant.

While Vonnegut's handling of tone is incredibly nuanced, it is *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s satirical style and dark humor which truly demonstrate Vonnegut's achievements in creating a provocatively honest portrait of war. Vonnegut uses black humor, delivered in a deadpan narrative voice, to satirize the very romanticized accounts of war that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at its core, seeks to undermine. Inherently ironic in nature, black humor works to present humor within implicitly dark situations where humor should not be present; for example, within death, destruction, and violence – the type of content populating every chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Near the beginning of Chapter Four, Billy realizes he has an “hour to kill” before the “saucer” would arrive to get him (Vonnegut 93). During this moment of free time, Billy decides to watch a film; however, after he turns on the television he “became unstuck in time” and consequently “saw the late movie backwards” (Vonnegut 93). Billy then launches into a retelling of the movie, a film “about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them” (Vonnegut 93) as he witnesses it: beginning with the film's ending – “American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England” (Vonnegut 93) – and ending with the film's beginning – “Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody good as new” (Vonnegut 94). At first, the mention of watching a film in reverse is frivolous, humorous even; however, by the end of the passage, it is apparent that Billy's delusion of becoming “unstuck in time” and watching the film in reverse is really his subconscious desire for things to go back to the way they were before the war – back to a time when everything

was “good as new.” The black humor at the heart of this passage runs throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* and is an effective method of portraying a dark reality which otherwise might be so dark that it is altogether off-putting for the reader.

Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut also demonstrates a preoccupation with the sheer carnage and waste of war, and works to demonstrate Pilgrim’s (and his own) struggle to find meaning in a meaningless world. As he said of his own war experience in a 1987 interview with National Public Radio:

The destruction of Dresden was my first experience with really fantastic waste. To burn down a habitable city and a beautiful one at that...I was simply impressed by the wastefulness, the terrible wastefulness, the meaninglessness of war (National Public Radio).

Vonnegut articulates this idea of waste throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, working to demonstrate the irony in the futility and triviality of war. In the first chapter of the book, when (presumably) Vonnegut is discussing how he will structure his novel, he writes:

“I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby,” I said. “The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he’s given a regular trial, and then he’s shot by a firing squad” (Vonnegut 6).

Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut works to portray the mass carnage of war, but rather than glorify this carnage as essential or justified, he presents it as “waste,” and in doing so opens commentary on the absence of meaning in war.



Like Vonnegut, O'Brien also uses irony as a means of demonstrating the "waste" of war. In "Speaking of Courage," when Norman Bowker is discussing the death of Kiowa, he says, "He was folded in with the war; he was part of the waste" (O'Brien 147). This is ironic, as Kiowa died literally in a field of human waste. Later in the chapter, the character Azar notes this irony, "'Wasted in the waste,' he said, 'A shit field. You got to admit, it's pure, world-class irony'" (O'Brien 158). O'Brien uses the irony of this statement to suggest the greater "waste" of war – the mass amount of unjustified and arbitrary human carnage. O'Brien takes this a step further in the chapter titled "In the Field," which chronicles Alpha Company's search for Kiowa's body the next day. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross explains that, "The filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier" (O'Brien 156). The filth, which in this case represents the presence of death, does not discriminate – violence is inescapable for all humankind. The men of Alpha Company face internal anxiety over this notion:

They felt bad for Kiowa. But they also felt a kind of giddiness, a secret joy, because they were alive, and because even the rain was preferable to being sucked under a shit field, and because it was all a matter of luck and happenstance (O'Brien 168).

This unpredictable and arbitrary nature of violence and of war – that it was "all a matter of luck and happenstance" – is a common idea throughout *The Things They Carried*, as well as throughout *In Our Time* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and each author works to consciously articulate the universality of violence in their work.

O'Brien, like Hemingway, also recognizes the latent violence of everyday life:

Wars can occur in marriages – not literal shooting usually – but combat, pretension, and violence, and so on – they can occur at the Walmart, they can occur between brothers and sisters. So in the end, the book is meant to be addressed not just to the uncertainties and ambiguities that soldiers face, but that we all face (Interview 2).

This philosophy, that war is present everywhere in life, is reflected in O'Brien's portrayal of scenes both before and after Tim's time at war. For example, in the final chapter, O'Brien recounts Tim's first love – with a girl named Linda when they were both nine years old. Linda is ultimately diagnosed with a brain tumor, and wears a hat to school every day to cover her hair loss. One day, the class bully, who had been taunting Linda for weeks, purposefully knocks off Linda's hat – an act of quotidian violence. Years later, Tim expresses the guilt he still feels at not being brave enough to stick up for Linda:

Naturally I wanted to do something about it, but it just wasn't possible. I had my reputation to think about. I had my pride...So I stood off to the side, just a spectator, wishing I could do things I couldn't do...For me, though, it did matter. It still does. I should've stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn't get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice at being brave might've helped a little (O'Brien 221).

Not only does O'Brien, like Hemingway, include scenes of everyday brutality in order to demonstrate the inescapability of violence, but he goes a step further in relating quotidian experiences with later war experiences, connecting the two worlds in a way that communicates the ubiquity of violence.

With regards to his tone, O'Brien's novel is distinctly different from the action-driven, emotionless tone of Hemingway and Vonnegut. Rather, O'Brien's tone throughout *The Things They Carried* could be described as "conversational philosophy." O'Brien's prose style is relaxed and comfortable, and the narrative voice often sounds as if O'Brien is telling his war stories to an old friend. There is a certain intimacy between writer and reader in *The Things They Carried* that is not present in *In Our Time* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There are several instances in the novel, for example, where O'Brien (in a voice indiscernible between author and character) breaks the fourth wall and directly speaks to the reader, often candidly explaining his literary choices in the book, such as in "Good Form," when the narrator says:

It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else is invented.

But it's not a game. It's a form (O'Brien 171).

One of O'Brien's greatest strengths is his ability to create an easy, conversational tone, which he uses to both discuss his novel in meta-fictional discourse, and which he also incorporates into the dialogue and relationships between the men of Alpha Company.

This "conversational" tone becomes very interesting, however, when considered within the actual content of the novel. Throughout *The Things They Carried*, the narrator examines several abstract philosophical questions; however, this examination is not done in elevated, ostentatious prose, but in the same simplified, relaxed tone that one might find in everyday conversation. The suggested reading level for the novel by its publisher,

Scholastic, is grades 9-12, suggesting there is a discrepancy between the lexicon of the novel and the adult content – and that is the point. O’Brien’s conversational tone demonstrates the struggle of the everyday person to comprehend the deep philosophical questions brought up by war, and the layman’s attempt to understand a senseless world the only way he knows how. The characters in *The Things They Carried* are attempting to understand “abstract ideals” such as what it means to be “brave,” are attempting to cope with the finality and arbitrary nature of death, and are attempting to find substance in the violence of war. By writing in a conversational tone, O’Brien demonstrates the disconnect between humanity’s threshold of understanding and the incomprehensibly violent world around us, and in doing so, presents a portrait of our desperate attempt to find meaning in a meaningless world.

## Conclusion

The story – from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace – is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

– Ursula K. Le Guin

*Prophets and Mirrors: Science Fiction as a Way of Seeing*

Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien's experimentation with literary techniques converge on a common unifying goal: to tell a "true" war story. And yet, one must consider whether they were successful in their attempts, and further consider whether any such entity as a "true war story" even exists. The self-awareness with which these authors approach their literature shows they too considered this quandary – the idea that literature cannot accurately depict trauma. Art Spiegelman, in *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, one of his graphic novels about the Holocaust, explores this idea when a young mouse also named Art Spiegelman (note the similarity to O'Brien in lending the author's name to the protagonist) struggles with how to write about the trauma of the Holocaust. In examining his situation, Art considers a quote by Irish writer, Samuel Beckett: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (Spiegelman 45). And yet, as Art notes, despite this fact, still "He said it" (Spiegelman 45). Here, Spiegelman observes the fundamental issue at the heart of trauma writing. Language is the medium in which we live, through which we understand. However, the purity of experience – of "silence and nothingness" – is reduced from the moment words are put to page – "an unnecessary stain" – as Beckett says. The intrinsic disparity between experience and language seems to suggest that no such idea as a "true war story," or any form of "true trauma story" for that matter, can exist. Despite how

aestheticized, innovative, or revolutionary a text may be in its approach to this problem, any literature which attempts to depict trauma will inevitably fall short of true experience.

And yet, despite this fact, history is remarkably populated with stories of war and other traumas. The reason for this seems to be the internalization of the story as a human coping mechanism not just for trauma, but for life itself. The epigraph to Dan P.

McAdams' "The Psychology of Life Stories" (2001) observes that:

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest among theorists and researchers in autobiographical recollections, life stories, and narrative approaches to understanding human behavior and experience. An important development in this context is D. P. McAdams's life story model of identity (1985, 1993, 1996), which asserts that people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self (McAdams 100).

As human beings, we frame our lives in stories – constructing narratives as a means of comprehending the incomprehensible world around us. It is for this reason that we continue to write stories about war, for the act of *attempting* to storify the trauma, despite its inevitable deficiency, is as important as the story itself. War literature is as much about humanity's use of stories as a means of coping with and comprehending trauma as they are about depicting the actual experience of war.

At the end of the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut recounts the Biblical tale of Lot's wife who, after the Lord rains "brimstone and fire" upon Sodom and Gomorrah, is led out of the destruction and told: "not to look back where all those people

and their homes had been” (Vonnegut 28). However, as Vonnegut notes, “she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes” (Vonnegut 28). As Vonnegut goes on to explain, “People aren’t supposed to look back” (Vonnegut 28), and yet, we can’t seem to help it. Looking back on trauma and destruction is inherently human, and it is the conscious portrayal of our inability to move past trauma which defines the war literature of Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O’Brien. As Vonnegut continues, “I’ve finished my war book now...This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt” (Vonnegut 28). Here, Vonnegut acknowledges a “failure” of literature to capture the experience of war, and yet, despite this view, he wrote a war book anyways. This “So it goes” attitude – a simultaneous acceptance of what cannot be changed (trauma; the inadequacy of literature) while also continuing to do what *can* be done (literature) – runs through Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O’Brien alike and demonstrates that though war literature may not be able to completely depict the violence and trauma of war, war literature remains an important means of comprehending the war experience. Only by signposting their shortcomings in pursuit of authenticity could these authors succeed in telling the stories that can’t be told.

## Appendix A: Personal Interview

Date: 5/19/15

**Interviewer:** Emily Nye**Interviewee:** Tim O'Brien

**Emily:** First of all, I just want to say thank you so much for allowing me to do this interview. It will hopefully add a lot of really exciting insight into my project. Before we begin, I just wanted to make sure that it was okay with you if I record our interview?

**O'Brien:** Of course.

**Emily:** So, just to launch right into it, I know you're busy, I don't want to take up too much time. Were there any questions in particular that you wanted to start with, or would you like to just go right down the line?

**O'Brien:** Oh, they were all good, so why don't you just start where you want to start.

**Emily:** Okay, so in your novel, *The Things They Carried*, you have a chapter entitled, "How to Tell a True War Story." So basically, how did you do so? How did you tell a "true war story?" Did you use any particular strategy in order to maintain artistic integrity or did you consider elements such as style, form, linearity, or language?

**O'Brien:** Well, the first part of the answer is that I don't think I did tell a true war story, at least in the literal sense of what we mean by the word "true." It's a work of fiction. The characters and the events are invented. They're a product of imagination. So it's not true in a literal sense of that word, but I hope it's true in the emotional sense. Although the events and the characters are invented, I hope that the story conveys something of the feel of being in a war, which is kind of the absence of so-called "truths." There's an old saying that in war, truth is the first casualty, and that rings valid to me. I'm not sure who you are, but it happens that God, the kind and gentle and rational being that we all hear about in Sunday school, the truth about your country – what used to be kind of solid truths – thou shalt not kill – are undermined by a war and war becomes "thou had better kill or will court-martial you." So all the kind of standards, or so-called "truths" that we enter in a war-holding as individuals get undermined by a war and you're left with a swirling, gray foggy ambiguity. Nothing seems true. And so, when you say "how did I tell a true war story?" – the purpose of the story was to kind of undermine, or sabotage the word "true" and show that it's really a complicated, fluid word. What's true to one person may not be true to another person, or what was true one day may not be true the next day. For example, people say "I love you" and they mean it, but people fall out of love, people get divorced and the next day it's not true. Truths can be contradictory. You could say America is a great country, and it's true. Or you could say America is a country that once permitted slavery, and that's true, and that's not good. The story is meant, and in fact the whole book, is meant in the end to try and convey a feeling of the ambiguities, and the uncertainties, and the mysteries of being in a war, and by extension of just being a human being. Wars can occur in marriages – not literal shooting usually – but combat,



pretension, and violence, and so on – they can occur at the Walmart, they can occur between brothers and sisters. So in the end, the book is meant to be addressed not just to the uncertainties and ambiguities that soldiers face, but that we all face.

The second part of my answer, on the last part, has to do with the four items you mentioned – and they're all important, but I don't categorize them the way it is all on the sheet there. They're all crucial, and they all occur to me, but they occur to me in the process of writing that I have in my head as I go to work each day and the stories that I'm telling. I'm like the reader – I'm discovering who the characters are and what they care about and what struggles are going to be in this story and I discover it as I am going along. I don't write it and I don't know when I begin. When I begin, I usually just begin with an image in my head. Sometimes it's an image from my real life and other times it's just an image that's a dream image that did not come from my life. But somehow, whatever that image is, it somehow captured my attention. And so I write a sentence, and then kind of follow the language where it takes me. A character might say something and the way that the language is phrased, the answer and how it's phrased – I imagine another character hearing that and how would they respond to that language and the tone of the story that the character uses. “I love you,” she says shrilly” or “she shrieked” is different from “I love you,” she murmured.” They're two different words – shrieking “I love you” and murmuring “I love you” are two different things. And so, I imagine being shrieked at by someone saying “I love you” and I imagine some kind of contention and then I imagine how a character would respond to that. All my novels, all my short stories, are really just me following the language as it unfolds – both the narrative and the dialogue both.

And then style, it finds its place and the tone with which the story is told – something about the form of the story – how its organized, comes out of the story. I don't impose it on the story – the form comes from the story and from my imagination – and so it all kind of blends together. In a sort of linear way – I start on line one and I end at the end of the story. And as I go through the story, trying to discover what it's about and making choices along the way, I'm learning. I don't start a story thinking “here's what I want to say” and “here's a message,” but I discover what I want to say as I am following the characters. And so in the end, the most important thing, in my perspective, is I have to learn to trust my own story. I have a little two words over my computer that just says “trust story.” You just trust it. You don't try to impose it on it, and you don't try to manipulate it. Let it just tell itself as best you can as if you were dreaming. And then later, lots of other things come into play with vision and unintentional repetition and working on pace – is it paced quickly enough that the reader isn't going to get bored? But that's after – that's revision work – the more kind of rational side of my head. That's a long answer, but it's such a good question that it deserved a long answer.

**Emily:** Thank you, I so appreciate it! Kind of going off of letter B: form, what I really like about your book is that you could argue that most of, if not all of your chapters could kind of stand alone as short stories. How did you formulate your narrative structure, especially when talking about something which doesn't have a structure – war is

shapeless and incomprehensible. So why did you decide to tell it in the structural way that you did and how did you go come to that?

**O'Brien:** Yeah, that was pretty rational. I knew kind of what I wanted to do from the outset. I wanted to write a book that might read like non-fiction, that this could have happened. The choice of my own name – to use it, some of my own background – to use it, dedicating the book to the characters – there were a whole bunch of things that I thought, well, just try to write a book that when the reader is reading it will feel as if it could be, in the literal sense, true. It was a kind of challenge – or a set of rules, that I established, and I wrote the whole book with that in mind as part of the form of the book. Another part of the form of the book is the story thing, as you can imagine. I wanted to write a book that wasn't completely linear. Linearity is true, I guess, in the world that we live in. You get in your car, you drive to the Walmart, you buy your groceries, and you drive home. But when you look back on your life, a day later or ten years later, you forget what came first, and what came second, and what came third. You forget the linearity. If I was to ask even you, what happened to you yesterday, how much do you think you're actually going to remember – the dialogue that you spoke, everything that you heard from people – and that was yesterday. But imagine ten years ago. And so I have this character looking back on his war many years afterward and he remembers the way you and I would. He remembers corpses, events, the day a man died, or the day I got married. Much will have been erased from memory – most of the stuff will have been erased. You're left with little snapshots – little tiny movies in our memories, and then blankness. If you think back to when you were a little kid, you might remember playing in your sandbox or eating chicken at the dinner table one day, but you remember getting to the dinner table or who called you, probably. Most of it is erased. And so I wanted to structure the book, or have a form of the book, where it wasn't linear. These are the memories of this character – looking out on the river and seeing the mountains and knowing you must go across the river and go into the mountains and maybe die – that's going to be memorable. But if you'll notice, I didn't have in the book the actual march into the mountains – it's not there. They're just in the mountains and Rat Kiley is killing a baby water buffalo. Everything else has been erased. That's how I approached the form of the book.

**Emily:** That actually is such a perfect answer because linearity is a big part of the project that I am going to talk about, so thank you for that.

**O'Brien:** Yes, I noticed that.

**Emily:** So in terms of the actual language that you use in the novel, did you struggle to find words that accurately portrayed it? Hemingway has this really good quote about how abstract words such as “glory” or the phrase “in-vain” – he felt they detracted from the authenticity of work?

**O'Brien:** They make me shiver. I don't like them. The abstract language has kind of ideology underneath it all. “In vain” – I hear it about Vietnam – all these “my son did not die in vain, there must have been a purpose behind it,” which I didn't see. It bothers me,

and I prefer nouns and verbs that are really hard and clear, specific, and humble. The rhetoric of war is not interesting to me, and it gives me the creeps a little bit. I much prefer a more humble approach to it, by looking at the rocks and the trees and rivers and mountains and buffalo and things like that. I believe in the concrete and in the end, stories have to have that. Rhetorical stories die – we don't read them anymore, we don't even know the names of them because they are so forgotten, and that's true not just for war stories, but for love stories and ghost stories and mother-daughter stories. If they're rhetorical, they're stale with a sentimental and clichéd feel to them.

**Emily:** How are we doing on time?

**O'Brien:** We're doing well so far, let's keep going.

**Emily:** Okay, just let me know if you need to go or anything. So your novel is a work of fiction, as you said, but it is based on events that happened in your life, so what strategies did you use to sort of balance the fictional and autobiographical elements of the story?

**O'Brien:** Well, it's not based on events in my life. I've got to say that really clearly. It's based on my life, as in I used some elements from my life. I'm from Minnesota; I graduated from college and was in the army, I was in Vietnam. But the actual events are, with one or two, maybe three exceptions, absolutely invented. They don't come from my life at all. It is a work of fiction. That's something that usually doesn't get clarified by people who write about my work, and maybe you could do it. Some of the background material is true, and a few of the events grow off of my own experience, but by and large, the events in the book are invented. I am trying to be accurate, though, but I'm not trying to accurate in terms of events, because they're made up. I'm trying to be accurate in terms of the feel of things. What does it feel like to be looking at a river and knowing you have to cross the river and go into the mountains and maybe die that day? What does it feel like if you're twenty-one years old when death doesn't even occur to most twenty-one year olds except in a very abstract and distant sort of way. So I'm more interested in portraying the accuracy of emotion, the accuracy of the feeling – the feel of guilt that guy feels in a chapter, two chapters, of the ambush in “The Man I Killed” – that guilty feeling that you feel for the enemy after someone dies. Yeah, you're a soldier and yes, it's a war, and yeah, he was an enemy soldier, but he's still a dead sixteen year old kid and you're going to have to live with that for the rest of your life and unless you're extremely cynical or else you're a total right-wing, stone-age person, you're going to feel guilt. Even congressmen feel guilt, and we talk about it in the war. So trying to be faithful to emotion is really my main effort. It does require a struggle for language. You have to avoid writing Hallmark cards about emotion – stupid little cliché things. You have to try to find fresh language and your own language to talk about guilt – not just some textbook language or something you read in a bestseller last week.

**Emily:** Thank you so much. So I have two more questions. The next one is a short one. Were you influenced by any other veteran authors who were writing about war, specifically Hemingway or Vonnegut or even earlier authors?

**O'Brien:** I had read Hemingway, of course, in both high school and college, and just for myself, I read a lot of Hemingway – almost all of it. And I had read some of Vonnegut, but they were influences in the same way that *The Hardy Boys* was an influence, and the way *Madame Bovary* was an influence and in the way fairy tales were. Everything that comes into your heart and your head as a reader, especially as a child, stays there in subtle kinds of ways. The magical things that appear in *The Things They Carried*, for example, in the final chapter, the dead Linda talking comes out of Thumbelina more than anything, I guess, or out of Hansel and Gretel. It comes out of my love as a kid, and as an adult both, for fiction in which miraculous, impossible things happen. One of the reasons, I guess, that I became a fiction writer is that you can make miracles happen. The dead can sit up and talk, and some emotional thing survives. I'm trying to walk a line of truth here for you. Hemingway and Vonnegut, yeah, they really mattered to me, but they didn't matter anymore or any less than lots and lots of other things I've read – Fitzgerald, who didn't write about war much, a little bit, but not much, or Willa Cather, for that matter. A whole bunch of writers have been read and when I'm at work actually writing, I don't think of any of them – Hemingway, Vonnegut, or any of the other ones. I think, instead, about the story that I'm in, and does it grip me in some way.

**Emily:** Thank you. And then, my final question is number six: Since you're writing about a very sensitive topic – war – naturally, I would assume that you consider in some capacity, the audience that you are writing for. Did you struggle to find a balance between writing an emotionally satisfying book and also writing about something that, at its essence, is not satisfying?

**O'Brien:** I don't think much about an audience. I mean, I guess sometimes there's a sensation that I have of somebody over my shoulder watching me as I write, but that somebody is not a specific person. It's sort of an amalgamation of God and my Dad and my best friends and ex-girlfriends – people who matter to me, but it's not one person. It's just this kind of conscience feel behind you. "Ah, you didn't work hard enough on that sentence" – that kind of feel, and "You could say that more purely, more naturally, more gracefully, or more beautifully." But it's not one person. It's sort of all these writers we talk about are pushed back there, too, going back to Shakespeare saying "That's not good enough," and maybe in the end, it's just my own conscience, my own judgment, but that's been formed by everything I've read and all the people I know, and so in the end, what I'm really trying to satisfy as an audience is myself – my own values.

**Emily:** That's fantastic. Well, was there anything else that you wanted to talk about that didn't come up in the interview?

**O'Brien:** No, you covered the most important stuff, obviously. You did a great job. I'm so glad you gave me the questions because I can think about them, and that helped a lot.

**Emily:** Yeah, I didn't want to spring them on you.

**O'Brien:** Well, I wish you lots of luck, Emily.

**Emily:** Thank you so much, and thank you for allowing me to interview you.

**O'Brien:** My pleasure.

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