

Breaking Metanarratives in Tim O'Brien's text: A Postmodern Analysis

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Abstract. The Vietnam War was a splitting conflict that caused significant social, political, and cultural upheaval in American society. Tim O'Brien's work explores the personal experiences of soldiers who fought in the war, their inner lives, and the complexities of telling true stories about the war. This paper discusses O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" as a representation of a unique literary work set in the context of the Vietnam War. The paper argues that O'Brien's narrative style departs from traditional metanarrative styles by emphasizing individual traumas and inner experiences, which transcends the question of factual accuracy. The paper utilizes Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of metanarratives in the postmodern era to explore how O'Brien's narrative style subverts traditional narrative structures, creating an emphasis on individual emotions and experiences. The paper argues that O'Brien's narrative style, which includes fragmentary narration, personification of items, and conscious expressions from the narrator's perspective, authentically elaborates the obscurity and disorder of people's inner world during wars. This narrative style provides a meaningful way for people to empathize and connect with the text, especially during times of uncertainty and despair such as the COVID-19 pandemic. O'Brien disrupts metanarratives, making readers doubt their own viewpoints and beliefs, and deconstructs the textures of power and authority. While his work is significant in subverting authoritative storytelling, the loss of belief in overarching narratives may lead to social unrest, political upheaval, and economic instability. The combination of the metanarrative and the postmodern subversive narration might be a possible solution.

1 Introduction

In his primary text, Tim O'Brien depicts the death of his comrade Kiley's best friend, Curt Lemon, during the war. Kiley writes a letter to Lemon's sister to inform her of the tragedy but receives no reply. O'Brien then shifts his focus on Lemon and recounts the circumstance of his death. Through his fragmentary narrative style, O'Brien conveys the shifting inner emotions and illuminations of the characters. The text blends authentic emotions of those impacted by the war with fictionalized war experiences inspired by those genuine feelings.

The subversive narrative style employed by O'Brien, which prioritizes individual emotions, is a prime example of countering the metanarrative. Generally, metanarratives offer an overarching narrative that provides a comprehensive understanding of reality, history, or society. However, Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French philosopher and literary theorist in the 20th century, argues that in the postmodern era, metanarrative is viewed as oversimplified, and it fails to consider individual inner experiences and differences. The functions of metanarratives generally include stable narrative structures and authoritative truths. To reject them, postmodern writers start using a language style that emphasizes individual inner events. Also, connecting with the contemporary context, in a postmodern world

characterized by increasing complexity, diversity, and fragmentation, maintaining a unified, coherent metanarrative is nearly impossible to depict the figure of the world. This theory perfectly aligns with O'Brien's subversive narrative style, which rejects a stable narrative structure and authoritative truth. Instead, O'Brien uses fragmentary narration to express the personal emotional experiences and feelings of those who endured the war, imbuing the text with ambiguity.

In the academic community, his unique writing style of how to pursue truth through fictions is a popular topic. For instance, in the article "The Soldier's Strife: An Introspective View Through the Work of Tim O'Brien", focusing on Tim O'Brien's texts *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*, Mandy Solomon analyzes the internal view of the war in O'Brien's narrative approach [1]. However, different from Solomon, the author in this article only focuses on the short story "How to Tell a True War Story" in the collection *The Things They Carried* and applies the metanarrative theory of Lyotard. She argues that Tim O'Brien breaks the previous metanarrative styles, including clear purpose and coherent narration, and he intertwines inner feelings and illuminations in his war story. This narrative style transcends the question of factuality and forms strong sense of sentimental connections to people who either experienced or did not.

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The author found this topic meaningful because people who live in the 21st century can form a strong sense of empathy. The whole human community is experiencing the severe covid period, which is another form of the war. Rather than fighting with people, people fight with viruses. Every individual must have undergone ambiguous, uncertain, and despairing feelings to the future, especially to people who have experienced the strict quarantine policy, the death of relatives due to the virus directly and indirectly. Like the war, both the start and the end of the virus are uncertain.

Reclaiming the main thesis, focusing on Tim O'Brien's text "How to Tell a True War Story" and applying Lyotard's theory of metanarrative in postmodernism, the author intends to argue that O'Brien departs from traditional metanarrative styles, which typically involve a clear purpose and a coherent narrative structure, by weaving together introspective reflections and insights into his story. In the main body part of this article, some key definitions such as Lyotard's theory related to metanarratives and fragmentary narration will first be clarified. Then, the author will explore O'Brien's new postmodern narrative standards: the fragmentary narration, the personification on items, and the strong conscious expressions from the narrator's perspective. They authentically elaborate obscurity and disorder of people's inner world during wars.

2 Key definitions

In order to analyse fragmentary narration in Tim O'Brien's text and apply the metanarrative, the author will clarify the definitions of fragmentary narration and Lyotard's theory related to metanarrative in postmodern context.

The most outstanding characteristic of fragmentary narration is that the images are strong while the connections are confusing. Usually, readers' urge for connections and the fragmentation forms a contrast in reading expectation. Writer's attempt to use fragmentary narrations to convey the confusion and absurdity of war is common in many wars' literary texts, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* in World War II and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* in World War II [2].

According to Lyotard, metanarratives are stories or theories that seek to provide a comprehensive explanation of reality or history. Examples of metanarratives include Christianity (in the 1st century AD), Enlightenment rationalism (in the last 17th century), and Marxism (in the mid-19th century). Meanwhile, metanarrative is problematic because it excludes alternative perspectives and marginalizes minority voice. Lyotard argues that postmodernism challenges the idea of a grand narrative of a single, overarching narrative, and there is the growing doubt within the postmodern era towards the all-encompassing nature of metanarratives. His definition of postmodernism is the skeptical attitude towards grand narratives, in terms of the role of storytelling losing its agents, its epic protagonists, its major conflicts, its overarching journeys, and its ultimate objectives [3].

Moreover, he claims that people should embrace diversity, difference, and complexity.

2.1 Fragmentary narration

Subverting a unified and coherent narrative pattern, Tim O'Brien intertwines the war experience with the true feelings of war through memory reconstructions. "Memory work is a conscious and purposeful performance of memory [4]." Truly, as how memory is recalled, the reconstruction through memory that constitutes the story content is fragmentary, interrupted by the inner feeling narrations. In other words, with the subjective emotional feelings in memory, the reconstruction of history or factual truth through memory would be impossible, but it can provide other meaningful truth, such as the authentic emotional experience. In the text, when he recalls how Lemon died, the memory narration does not process in a linear way. Instead, the seemingly harmonious environment first comes to his mind, such as the scene that Lemon and Kiley were playing catch with smoke grenades. Then, the view changes suddenly and unexpectedly, that handsome kid Lemon was sucked high into a tree. These fragments of conscious senses set up the memory, and O'Brien authentically narrates how the emotional experience processes in the memory.

His narrative style can be seen as a contemporary metanarrative in the postmodern tradition, as it is more disjointed, consisting of a series of short stories or narratives rather than a clearly recognizable and unified whole [5]. The fragmentation is a key element of postmodernism, and O'Brien employs it to blur the boundary between truth and fiction, conveying the cruelty and absurdity of war. The disjointed nature of his writing reflects the fragmented reality of war and the tremendous impact it has on those who experienced the war. Readers are drawn into the narrative and experience the same confusion, uncertainty, and sense of loss with the characters in the story. Through this writing style, O'Brien shows the importance of individual experiences and emotions, highlighting the limitations of traditional overarching narratives to capture the complexity of humanist experiences.

In the text, the fragmentary episode at the beginning of the story is remarkable and expresses a strong sense of absurdity and incredibility to war. O'Brien's comrade Kiley heartedly writes a very sad and serious letter to his dead friend's sister about this tragic news. He also promises that he will visit her after the Vietnam War is over. His friend is dead, and it is so heartbroken for the young Kiley. He hopes to form connections and empathy with his friend's sister, seeing her the emotional support. However, she never replies. The situation turns to become extremely incongruous and illogical. The contrast between Kiley's heartfelt letter to his dead friend's sister and her lack of response is absurd because it is so unexpected and does not make sense. Kiley hopes to connect with the sister and offer emotional support, but her lack of response makes the situation even more tragic and incomprehensible. Both the characters in the story

and readers feel absurd and indescribable due to the sense of confusion and disbelief that they feel in the face of this paradoxical situation.

With the sudden stop of the story narration, O'Brien shifts to convey the emotional experience during war. "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior [6]." The indifference of the sister's reaction is incredible and cruel, which reflects the truth of war. Instead of simply stating facts when writing a true war story, O'Brien uses fragmentary narration to reconstruct the war through memory and subjective feelings. He exhibits subtle links between memory and imagination through this fragmentary narration. O'Brien emphasizes the obscenity and absurdity of war experience, which is the authentic humanist experience in war.

Connecting to the postmodern context, the author extends from the idea of incredibility to war event to the collapsed credibility to life and the society reflected in O'Brien's text. The young man Kiley feels hurt to the sister's incomprehensible and cruel reaction. Readers can observe his mental distortion through his "big gentle, killer eyes" and the shift in his language towards referring to the sister as "cooze" [6]. The individual's distorted mentality in the microcosm of a single war event reflects the broader crisis of humanity and skepticism towards fundamental questions of life in the macrocosmic postmodern society. O'Brien employs fragmented narration to express people's confusion and mental collapse not only in war but also in the collective postmodern context.

2.2 Transcendence of reality and personification on items

Tim O'Brien goes beyond depicting the sense of order and credibility in reality during war. Instead, he portrays a magical reality by personifying objects that exist in the war scene. This technique not only enhances the readers' understanding of the impact of war on individuals but also adds a layer of depth and imagination to the narrative. Personification on items makes readers understand the environment and situation depicted in the story comprehensively and sentimentally. In the text, items and environments are not just simple props, but emotional beings that carry fear, anxiety, and pressure. In O'Brien's text depiction, the background of the war fills all various voices, the cocktail party going on, the rock and the trees talking politics, the monkeys talking religion. The whole country talks. From the literary perspective, it shows the significant role of metaphorically using verbs to realize personification [7]. By personifying objects with verbs, O'Brien brings humanist characteristics to them, making these objects more lifelike and concrete.

To those who have not experienced war, the illuminations described in O'Brien's writing may seem unbelievable or even non-existent. These people lack the personal experience to comprehend the emotional realities of war. However, O'Brien's use of figurative language to convey truth is a subversive innovation that explores the possibilities of fiction [8]. The core strength of

storytelling is the exhibition of truth blended with the author's own personal experience, rather than the mere narration of facts or objective truth. O'Brien's writing is a testament to this, as his fragmented narrative style imbues his work with a sense of personal emotional experience that is more impactful than a straightforward retelling of events. Through his writing, O'Brien demonstrates the power of fiction to convey truth in a way that is accessible and relatable to those who have not personally experienced the subject matter. His work challenges traditional notions of what constitutes truth in literature and invites readers to explore the complex interplay between personal experience, narrative structure, and truth.

O'Brien exhibits personal emotional experiences and feelings, which are other aspects of truths. In the text, he repetitively emphasizes "it's all exactly true [6]". His feelings embodied on items are true. These fictional depictions and illuminations that reflect individual's inner experiences are the power of story writing. "O'Brien's literary works on the Vietnam War consistently break down the boundaries between "memory and imagination, lessons and dreams, truth and fiction, and reality and the text [8]." The emphasis of picaresque fantasy further breaks the boundary between reality and individual illuminations, which significantly reflects obscure and uncertain emotional experience during war. His subjective depiction of personified items can be seen as "building on a tension between materialist and humanist understandings of the war experience [9]." Rather than writing in a grand way, O'Brien focuses on individual's humanist understandings and inner experiences to war. Because this strong sense of obscurity and absurdity are emotional experience during war, people who experienced war form strong connections.

Meanwhile, for people who did not experience war, he encourages them to question some of their assumptions about fiction and truth: "A true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical [8]." The personification of items in his narration makes the war event fictional but the feelings real. In other words, it is because of these authentic humanist emotions and inner illuminations that makes the whole event obscure and unreal. By personifying these objects, O'Brien enables the readers to comprehend more effectively the influence of war on individuals, while at the same time, developing a closer connection between readers and characters. Through this figurative language, readers can obtain a more profound comprehension of the significance and implications of these objects, as well as feeling more deeply the pain and suffering brought by war. In other words, it challenges readers to think more deeply about the relationship between fiction and truth and invites them to explore the complex interplay between personal experience, narrative structure, and truth.

2.3 Strong conscious expressions from the narrator himself and the shift of perspectives

Subverting the expression of an obvious purpose in a war story, Tim O'Brien has no intention of teaching moral

lessons, but instead, he exhibits large amount of his self-conscious narrations. On the contrary, the expression of intention or purpose is a prominent feature of the concept of metanarrative, which aims to provide legitimacy by projecting the achievement of a grand idea, as exemplified by narratives of the Enlightenment and Marxism [10]. Conversely, O'Brien, as a war storyteller who has lived through the Vietnam War, is aware of his role as a writer and has no intention of conveying a singular overarching message or lesson. He does not seek to condemn the brutality or wickedness of war, pass judgment on its morality, or praise acts of sacrifice. "The smell of napalm, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that [11]." Similarly, Michael Herr in his Vietnam War novel *Dispatches* also portrays the chaos and destructive impact brought by the war, which aligns with O'Brien's perspective.

O'Brien completely exhibits the ambiguity of the process of the war, contradictions, and absurdity of the world. The most impressive section of his conscious expression is the placement of counterparts: "Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. ... and the only certainty is absolute ambiguity [6]." O'Brien's use of counterparts in his narration is a powerful technique that highlights the ambiguity and contradictions of war. By placing opposing concepts side by side, he draws attention to the complex and often incomprehensible nature of the war experience. His statement, "the old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true," underscores the profound changes that occur when individuals are confronted with the harsh realities of war.

What makes O'Brien's narrative so effective is his refusal to offer any explicit answers or guidance. He recognizes that war is a deeply personal and subjective experience, and that each individual's perspective is unique. By presenting his own experiences in a straightforward and unvarnished way, he encourages readers to draw their own conclusions and to confront the ambiguity of the war experience. This demonstrates his awareness of his role as a mediator between individuals who have direct knowledge of war and those who do not [8]. He understands that his readers may not have direct knowledge of the war, so he uses his storytelling to bridge the gap between their experiences and his own. By conveying the authentic humanist and emotional experiences of those who have been affected by war, he brings a deep level of understanding and empathy to his readers. This comprehensive understanding would be difficult to achieve through factual accounts alone, as what metanarrative does.

Moreover, the strong self-awareness is also reflected from the shift of perspectives. In the text, O'Brien avoids using the first-person pronoun singularly, but rather shifts among the third-person perspective, the second-person perspective, and both the first-person perspective from O'Brien himself and the first-person plural, which is O'Brien and his comrades. The use of the second-person perspective shuttles in the whole text, and it appears nearly exclusively at the last few of the paragraphs in the story. By demonstrating how personal experiences occur within a space shaped by collective forces and how major

historical events are subjectively experienced, the shift of perspectives intricately weaves together the personal and the collective to create a captivating narrative [10]. Since the perspective of the second person breaks the time and space, readers who either experienced the war or did not feel that the writer talks to them straightforwardly, which enforces the emotional connection between micro individual experiences and the collective.

O'Brien does not seek to legitimize a master idea or moral lesson through his writing, but instead depicts the ambiguity, contradictions, and absurdity of war in his strong conscious expressions. In addition to his direct expressions of his inner feelings and monologues, his strong self-awareness is also reflected in his shift of perspectives, including third-person, second person, and both first-person singular and plural. The use of second-person perspective is most outstanding. It enhances the emotional connection between individual experiences and the collective, breaking time and space. He brings an authentic humanist perspective to war storytelling, drawing from his own experiences to create a powerful narrative.

3 Discussions

Tim O'Brien challenges and subverts traditional narrative structures by using fragmentary constructions and mixing elements of reality and fiction. His writing style breaks the dominance of metanarrative, which uses a linear narration and exhibits the chronological order. In this innovative way, he explores dynamism and diversity of personal and collective memory. At the same time, he detects how people shape and interpret their own experiences and history through stories and memory narratives. His work reveals that storytelling and memory are unreliable, which contrasts sharply with traditional narrative structures. This contrast, to some extent, illuminates another significance of his writing: he deconstructs the textures of power and authority, revealing their instability and unreliability. By disrupting metanarratives, O'Brien makes readers doubt their own viewpoints and beliefs, prompting them to consider stories and narratives in a broader and more complicated aspect.

However, one possible counterargument of this paper might be that it is inevitable O'Brien has to use metanarrative elements when he narrates the war episodes, because those are the standard and map to navigate the human history and the basis of narration with topics related to history [5]. Thus, the use of the new postmodern narrative style is credible. However, the author wants to claim her main argument with an example. One thing subverts the other thing does not necessarily mean that these two cannot exist simultaneously. Parallel to the relationship between metanarrative and new postmodern narrative, it is true that the latter makes some subversions and innovations, but it does not prevent these two narratives to be coexistent and appear in the same text.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, applying Lyotard's theory of metanarratives, the author argues that Tim O'Brien departs from traditional metanarrative styles by weaving together introspective reflections and insights into his story. He mainly uses fragmentary narration, personification on items, and strong conscious expressions. He brings an authentic humanist perspective to war storytelling, drawing from his own experiences to create a powerful narrative. His writing has significance in subverting authoritative storytelling and revealing the complexity and diversity of storytelling.

This paper contributes to the study of war storytelling by offering a nuanced analysis of the way in which O'Brien's works challenge traditional metanarratives while also acknowledging the potential challenges that can arise from the loss of belief in overarching narratives. It is true that O'Brien's subversion of traditional narration is outstanding and meaningful, but the legitimation crisis caused by the incredulity to authoritative narration cannot be ignored. The disbelief in overarching narrative that justifies the social, political, and economic structure of society might lead to social unrest, political upheaval, and economic instability. In such a situation, it becomes necessary to reform the dominant metanarrative with a new narrative that is more credible and relevant to the current context. The combination of the metanarrative and the postmodern subversive narration by writers such as Tim O'Brien might be a possible solution.

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