

# Memory and Narrative: Reading *The Things They Carried* for Psyche and Persona

Frank Hassebrock and Brenda Boyle, Denison University

**Abstract:** This essay looks closely at how two disciplines, Psychology and English, can use the same text for similar purposes. A Psychology professor discusses how Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* can exemplify for his students how memory is used to construct a self, a psyche. A teacher of literature then examines how the same text demonstrates for students the rhetorical construction of a fictional self, a persona, and also how that construction is influenced by the various historical periods represented in the novel's stories. Through the investigation of these two disciplinary approaches, students in our classes gain an appreciation for the psychological functions of remembering and the rhetorical functions of reading.

People select and interpret certain memories as self-defining, providing them with privileged status in the life story... . To a certain degree, then, *identity is a product of choice*. We choose the events we consider most important for defining who we are and providing our lives with some semblance of unity and purpose. And we endow them with symbolism, lessons learned, integrative themes, and other personal meaning that make sense to us in the present as we survey the past and anticipate the future. (McAdams, 2004, p. 104)

A rhetoric incorporates more than practical strategies for speaking and writing. Rhetoric reflects the values and perspectives of a culture. It is a distillation of what a given society counts as knowledge and evidence, how it defines social connections and responsibilities, the context in which communicative acts will be interpreted. The rhetoric you teach or are taught makes a difference. (Edlund, 2008, p. 2)

Several years ago, we discovered that we both either were using or thinking of using Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) in very different classes. Subsequently, Frank has used the novel in several offerings of his first-year psychology seminar entitled "The Seven Sins of Memory: The Psychology of Remembering and Forgetting" and Brenda has assigned the novel in a literature class entitled "Vietnam War Fictions." What is most interesting about our discovery is that, despite our disciplinary differences, many of our aims in using the novel intersect and overlap. Though our disciplines might mandate clear distinctions between them, what strikes us both about *The Things They Carried* is how it invites similar responses from different disciplines, especially in the challenging of "truth" by its narrator, "Tim O'Brien."

---

## *Across the Disciplines*

A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2009.6.3.20>

wac.colostate.edu/atd

ISSN 554-8244

*Across the Disciplines* is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by [Colorado State University](#) and [Georgia Southern University](#). Articles are published under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license](#) (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2017 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

*The Things They Carried* was published in 1990, more than fifteen years after the United States left South Vietnam and twenty after O'Brien left. The novel was preceded by four other O'Brien books: the first, *If I Die In a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), is the only non-fiction of the four and is his memoir of the 1969-1970 year he spent in Vietnam as an Infantry soldier. Many of the stories or elements of the stories told in the memoir are echoed in *The Things They Carried*. The three novels published before 1990 include *Northern Lights* (1975), the National Book Award winner for 1979, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Nuclear Age* (1985). According to a note in the 1990 Broadway Books edition, most of the stories from *The Things They Carried* had been published previously in popular journals like *Esquire*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and *Playboy* or literary publications such as *Granta* and *The Best American Short Stories 1987*.

Though most of *The Things They Carried* stories were published individually, the text has a coherence that justifies its being named a composite novel (O'Gorman, 1998). The stories feature a first-person narrator and character named Tim O'Brien whose tale is about the American Army Infantry unit he belonged to in Vietnam. The stories are linked by their being about the different characters in the unit from the perspective of the narrator, but author O'Brien also integrates stories about the stateside Tim O'Brien as he deliberates whether to heed his draft notice ("On the Rainy River"), as he encounters the drudgery of returning to the mid-western United States after having been in Vietnam for a year ("Speaking of Courage"), and about a trauma that the narrator as a little boy experienced ("The Lives of the Dead"). All of the twenty-two stories contribute to the novel's contemplation of the "things" (personal possessions as well as memories) the soldiers carried into and out of Vietnam.

In what follows, each of us discusses how we use the novel in our separate classes, calling attention to the conceptual links between our classes whenever possible. Frank begins this central portion of the essay by discussing his class, including the theoretical underpinnings to what he wants students to learn about the psychology of memory and narrative ways of remembering. Brenda continues as she talks about how her Literature class explores the novel as a cultural artifact and investigates its narrative rhetoric. We conclude with a discussion of when our two ways of knowing and teaching about memory and narrative come together, when Brenda visits Frank's class.

## Memory and Narrative: Reading for *Psyche*

In this part of the essay, my goal is to describe how the reading of *The Things They Carried* can be effectively used by students to enhance their understanding of the psychology of human memory. The principal textbook for the course is *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Remembers and Forgets* (2001), written by Daniel Schacter, Harvard psychologist and prominent memory researcher. Schacter provides a rich description of several types of memory errors (e.g., transience, absent mindedness, blocking, persistence, suggestibility, misattribution, and bias). Indeed, the psychological research presented by Schacter readily shows that our memories are easily influenced by many factors and that memory errors occur frequently. For example, we forget well-learned information and familiar people and places, we remember specific experiences differently over time, we reconstruct memories to fit our current needs and motives, we remember vividly events that never happened, and we are easily influenced by the suggestions of others when we recall shared experiences. Indeed, our memories are not infallible, but yet we generally manage to remember experiences and information sufficiently in order to productively complete the tasks, activities, goals, and challenges that comprise everyday life. Throughout the semester I also have my students read several articles from experimental psychology journals such as *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *Psychological Science*, and *Current Directions in Psychology* that are relevant to each of the memory "sins." By reading these articles, the students become more familiar with the intricacies of experimental methods used in several different areas of contemporary memory research in

psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Some examples of the topics that we cover include eyewitness memory, amnesia, false recognition, memory of traumatic and emotional experiences, memory and aging, exceptional memory skills as well as clinical deficits in memory, and the role of memory (and the consequences of memory errors) in many everyday tasks such as text comprehension, language, planning, decision making, and social interaction.

*The Things They Carried* is assigned over a two-week period near the end of the semester so that reading O'Brien's novel is one of the culminating experiences for my students. At this point, we have turned our attention to understanding the personal and social functions of remembering past experiences, events, and situations. My goal now is to have students examine memory as a narrative way of knowing about one's self, others, interpersonal relationships, and the world through remembering and telling stories (memories) about personal experiences (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Bruner, 1987). Whereas paradigmatic thought is used to make sense of the world through formal modes of analysis such as scientific research (an experimental psychology of memory), "narrative intelligence" is embodied in remembering and telling a story, "whether a fictional story—as in a movie, novel, or play—or a factual one, as in history, the news, or the anecdotes that sprinkle our speech" (Randall, 1999).

Though O'Brien's novel is fiction and not memoir or autobiography, the fictional events and experiences presented in the novel can be considered as examples of the character/narrator's autobiographical memories (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Psychological research has shown that autobiographical memories represent knowledge of our self in the past, but we also use this self-knowledge to guide our behaviors in the present and even our projected future self (Bluck, 2003; Conway, 2005). Therefore, the self (or "psyche") that is revealed in the narrator's stories in *The Things They Carried* can be examined with respect to the psychological functions of memory that we have been considering in the course. Our analysis of these self-related memory functions is based upon a journal article by David Pillemer (2001) which I ask my students to read. Pillemer describes how autobiographical memories of specific experiences and momentous events contain distinctive details about one's self as well as other people, temporal and spatial information, and emotional reactions. An autobiographical or personal event memory "represents a specific event that took place at a particular time and place; it contains a detailed account of the person's own personal circumstances at the time; the memory includes sensory imagery (visual, auditory, olfactory, or tactile); and the rememberer believes that the event actually happened" (Pillemer, 2001, p. 124). In our first discussion of the novel, I ask the students to identify several examples of personal event memories presented by the narrator. For example, in "Ambush," the narrator describes his detailed memory of the events that happened during a night patrol positioned along a trail outside of My Khe.

We were working in two-man teams—one man on guard while the other slept, switching off every two hours—and I remember it was still dark when Kiowa shook me awake for the final watch. The night was foggy and hot. ... The mosquitoes were fierce. I remember slapping at them, wondering if I should wake up Kiowa and ask for some repellent, then thinking it was a bad idea, then looking up and seeing the young man come out of the fog. He wore black clothing and rubber sandals and a gray ammunition belt. He seemed at ease. He carried his weapon in one hand, muzzle down, moving without any hurry up the center of the road. ... I had already pulled the pin on a grenade. I had come up to a crouch. It was entirely automatic. ... The grenade made a popping noise—not soft but not loud either—not what I'd expected—and there was a puff of dust and smoke. ... He fell on his back. His rubber sandals had been blown off. There was no wind. He lay at the center of the trail, his right leg bent beneath him, his one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 132)

This specific autobiographical memory contains a detailed and chronological account of a significant personal experience and its content is rich in sensory and perceptual images. The memory is narrated so that there is a "reliving" quality to it (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). After identifying and discussing several stories that represent vivid recollections of "near-experience" memories, we turn our attention to understanding why the narrator has selected these particular memories to be told in the narrative. In other words, we consider the question of "what is memory for?"

Several researchers have shown that a person's selective recall and interpretation of autobiographical memories are motivated by goals, motives, and intentions that are relevant to or shaped by one's self or identity (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001). In particular, I ask my students to review Pillemer's (2001) article in which he has identified several psychological directives or "life lessons" that commonly appear in systematic analyses of personal event memories. An "originating event" is remembered for how it triggered or initiated one's significant long-term goals and plans. Memories of "analogous events" are used to guide ongoing behaviors in the present such as decision-making, problem-solving, and other task-oriented activities. Memories of an "anchoring event" provide support, affirmation, or validation of one's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Recollections of "turning point events" help one to understand the reasons behind the significant redirections and changes in one's goals, plans, and values. Vivid memories of turning point experiences are especially significant because they frequently represent emotional, intellectual, or developmental landmarks. For instance, students can easily recognize the turning point function presented in "On The Rainy River," when the young Tim O'Brien narrator describes a series of experiences that culminated in his decision to report for the draft rather than to evade the draft.

The man who opened the door that day is the hero of my life. How do I say this without sounding sappy? Blurt it out—the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time—a silent, watched presence. Six days later, when it ended, I was unable to find a proper way to thank him, and I never have, and so, if nothing else, this story represents a small gesture of gratitude twenty years overdue. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 48)

The psychological factors that underlie memory "sins" also apply to autobiographical memories which are reconstructed differently over time based upon an individual's current self-related knowledge and goals. Therefore, the meaning or lesson of a specific experience is extracted over time and its function or impact on one's self can change in successive remembering. In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator's stories of a specific experience vary significantly in affective tone and narrative detail as they are "told and retold" (Bruner, 1987) over the course of the novel. The issue for students to evaluate is not the accuracy or truthfulness of the narrator's memories; rather, it is to consider how the stories' different forms reveal the ways in which the narrator's memories of an experience and self-understanding change over time. In the second section of our essay, Brenda describes how she uses these same story variations to illustrate the effect of the narrator's rhetorical devices on her students' reactions to the novel. For my students, I draw attention to Pillemer's point that it is the ongoing process of reinterpreting a memory of an experience over time that has a continuing impact on a person's current life, a concept that he calls "retrospective causality."

A personal event memory is much more than a passive record; it is an active agent of direction, guidance, and deepened understanding. The psychological reality of the event for the rememberer, including the constructed meaning it holds within the context of an

autobiography, takes on a life of its own apart from the objective, historical truth, however that elusive quality of objectivity is defined. (Pillemer, 1998, p. 86)

In order to explore the interpretive process of retrospective causality, I ask the students to discuss how a particular event is recalled differently by the narrator over the course of the novel. For example, at several points in the novel the narrator discusses his role in the killing of a young Viet Cong soldier, but the event is described inconsistently in different "stories" (memories). O'Brien the narrator first presents this memory in "The Man I Killed" and the description represents the characteristics of a rich and distinctive personal event memory. However, the memory represented in this story also includes events from the dead man's life that could not have been known to the narrator. Thus, students typically claim that this chapter, in particular, resembles a fictional story and is not necessarily a believable memory. In the next chapter, "Ambush," the narrator is asked by his daughter if he had ever killed anyone in the war. The narrator's direct reply to his daughter's question is only "of course not" but the narrator's personal event memory is elaborately described to the reader (as shown in the example I presented earlier). In these two chapters, "The Man I Killed" and "Ambush," O'Brien the author sets up a narrative structure where one chapter presents the narrator's "story" and a following chapter relates the narrator's "memory" of the same experience. In our discussion, the question of whether either the story is true or the memory is accurate demonstrates the importance of considering two other functions of autobiographical memory that are known as "correspondence" versus "coherence" (Conway, 2005). Whereas memory accuracy (or what O'Brien refers to as "story truth" in his novel) depends on correspondence with experience (or "happening truth"), the directive functions of memory depend more upon psychological coherence (McAdams, 2001). Conway (2005) claims that "coherence is a strong force in human memory that acts at encoding, post-encoding remembering, and re-encoding, to shape both the accessibility of memories and the accessibility of their content. This is done in such a way as to make memory consistent with an individual's current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs" (p. 595). Brenda describes later how she addresses this same issue of "truth" by having students examine the novel as a work of rhetoric and a cultural artifact.

In our class discussions, we compare the different story versions of a particular event and also the narrator's reported thoughts or interpretations of each version in order to explore how story coherence reveals the memory directives that are most central to the narrator's identity or self (Pillemer, 2001). According to Jefferson Singer, a clinical psychologist, uniquely enduring autobiographical memories are "self-defining" and serve integrative functions for self, identity, and personality. For example, self-defining memories are perceptually vivid, have intense affective qualities, are recalled repetitively, are linked to other similarly intense memories, and reflect important and long-term aspects of personality that are unresolved conflicts or enduring concerns (Singer & Blagov, 2004). For O'Brien the narrator, the self-defining aspects of remembering the event of killing a man are revealed in his introspective thoughts that accompany or follow each version of this story presented in the novel.

Pillemer (2001) also describes the research of McAdams (2001), who has conducted systematic content analyses of the general symbolic functions of autobiographical memories or "life stories." Some memory narratives contain themes of "redemption" in which a negative event or experience eventually comes to represent a positive outcome or life change. On the other hand, in "contamination" stories, positive events or experiences eventually yield negative life impacts. Students identify many stories in *The Things They Carried* that have the characteristics of contamination narratives. For example, we have discussed how narrator O'Brien's stories about the man he killed follow this theme. The students also have identified several other contamination stories about personal failure and disappointment, emotional trauma, and injury and death. For example,

narrator O'Brien (1990) remembers one soldier saying "You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same" (p. 114). Following the turning point decision not to avoid the draft, O'Brien remembers that "the day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending, I was a coward. I went to the war" (p. 61). However, as I mentioned earlier, many of the narrator's negative memories are reconstructed throughout the novel. Based upon both Pillemer's (2001) article and our discussion of McAdam's (2001, 2004) research, students are aware that one's recollections and memories are continually reconstructed, modified, and reframed. Therefore, I ask the students to think about the psychological functions that can convert a contamination narrative into a redemptive narrative. According to Pillemer:

Opportunities for positive life change may exist whenever memories of momentous events are open to reconsideration and reinterpretation. ... If the negative memory can be integrated into an overarching narrative theme of purpose and self-worth, then its damaging impact may be neutralized. If the memory can be reinterpreted in terms that are motivating rather than demoralizing, it will be transformed from a limiting force into an enabling one. (2001, p. 131)

The O'Brien narrator addresses this reconstructive function at several points in the novel in his evaluative comments and thoughts about why he reconstructs the stories differently and about how the negative memories are relevant to his current self. For example, in "Spin," the narrator observes, "Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. ... Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are" (p. 38). Pillemer (2001) calls this process of memory reconstruction and reinterpretation "story repair." After discussing the narrator's motivations, values, and beliefs across many of the remembered stories, most students form favorable impressions or positive evaluations of his personality and actions for even those negative experiences which they first identified as contamination themes. The narrator's story repair is an example of how autobiographical memories can be reconstructed to provide redemptive functions for self-regulatory processes including self-evaluation, self-verification, and self-enhancement (Sutin & Robins, 2008).

The search for psychological coherence (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Conway, 2005) drives the interpretive process of selectively remembering and reconstructing one's experiences through narration. This is a central theme that I have students explore as we discuss O'Brien's novel and the interactions between memories and stories, experience and imagination, truth and fiction, and coherence and correspondence that occur in the process of constructing one's self knowledge and identity. Interestingly, this same theme is discussed by Brenda in the next section of our essay. However, she has her literature students explore how the narrator's "persona" is constructed through rhetoric and the use of first person referral (which, of course, is the tense used to report autobiographical memories). O'Brien the narrator shows this psychological development or narrative invention of a redemptive self (persona) at several points in the novel. For example, in "Notes" he claims:

In ordinary conversation I never spoke much about the war, certainly not in detail, and yet ever since my return I had been talking about it virtually nonstop through my writing. Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly

catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt. ... I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. ... By telling stories you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 157)

Issues of memory accuracy—whether or not a story is true—are secondary to the psychological purposes of reconstructing a memory/story. Thus, in O'Brien's (1990) novel the narrator's claim that "story truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (p. 179) challenges students to consider how memories and stories may share psychological functions relevant to the development of self and identity and especially how self-defining memories can be mapped onto story types that reflect thematic life lessons (Conway, 2005; McAdams, 2001; Singer & Blagov, 2004).

### Memory and Narrative: Reading for *Persona*

Frank has discussed how *The Things They Carried* is used in his Psychology class to explore how narrative and memory function similarly in constructing one's self or identity. In this next section, I contend that the novel can be used in a Literature class as a cultural artifact that rhetorically illustrates the sensibilities of the Vietnam War era. In my "Vietnam War Fictions" class, students read both historical background material and also a variety of fictions, including novels such as Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1986), Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985), and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974). My aim in the class is to help students unpack many of the myths of the War they have encountered through high school history classes and mainstream films, and one important way they accomplish this is by examining these fiction (and non-fiction) texts as artifacts of the era. Whereas Frank wants to validate for his psychology students the value of fiction as a way of understanding the functions of memory, I want to validate for my students of literature the value of fiction as a way of understanding the functions of culture. My approach argues that though the fiction may or may not represent actual occurrences, it does provide alternative viewpoints on the past that are as suggestive of the War as are texts labeled non-fiction, or "history." As Frank already has pointed out, Tim O'Brien the narrator makes a similar point when he distinguishes between "story truth" (fiction) and "happening truth" (history). In *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, Mark Taylor (2003) discusses the collaborative relationship between Vietnam War fiction and history. Before he arrives at that conclusion about collaboration, however, he admits that this is a complicated relationship about a complicated issue: "Nevertheless, it has become a widely held assumption that, as a postmodern war, portrayals of the war in Vietnam demand a postmodern style to be meaningful, or indeed to reflect the meaninglessness of the war. Writers and critics of literature often give the impression that there is diminishing room in which the historian can usefully work" (p. 24). Apparently according to O'Brien, neither universally is better than the other; fiction and non-fiction serve different purposes for different audiences in different contexts. (This philosophy might help to explain why O'Brien published both a memoir and fiction concerning the same events.) O'Brien's distinction accords with the aims of a rhetorical study of fiction: the collaborative relationship between an author/narrator who wants the audience to experience viscerally or intellectually or emotionally; the needs and expectations of his audience in order to have those experiences; and the possibilities of conveying that experience given the limitations of language and genre.

Traditionally, literature has been taught in English classes as a vehicle for components like symbolism, irony, allusion and metaphor. New Critics, those who espouse identifying "good

literature" by whether it resolves its internal conflicts, regardless of its historical or cultural or authorial contexts, use these traditional elements to make these identifications, and until a few decades ago, this was the primary critical mode for analyzing literature in the twentieth century. However, with the arrival in the latter third of the twentieth century of "critical theory" in the United States, the boundaries of what counted as "text," and, consequently, literary criticism, expanded. In the "Introduction" to *Critical Theory Since 1965*, Hazard Adams asserts "that much more than what had previously been thought of as relevant is involved today in questions about literature" (Adams & Searle, 1986, p. 1). Judith Halberstam (2005) characterizes this change to the field, positively so, as "the death of English," as she hails the discipline's being more cross-disciplinary than ever. While I believe critical theories can be used to elucidate almost any text, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is notable because it can be used in literature classes to demonstrate multiple theoretical approaches, many of which cross disciplines. Since this novel concerns a period of tumult and upheaval in the United States, both in terms of the War and its effects and in terms of the appearance of critical theory, it is appropriate to teach *The Things They Carried* as a refractory text that simultaneously challenges our ideas of the War and actively resists those traditional literary criticism methods. In this sense, the novel rhetorically substantiates the political and cultural turmoil of the Vietnam War era.

*The Things They Carried* can be used in a variety of literature classes (and writing composition classes) because it disrupts received notions about the War, about personal qualities such as courage, honor, and truth, and about a writer's voice. In literature classes, the novel can be read as a cultural artifact when it challenges ideas about its primary subject matter, the 1960s and 1970s American war in Vietnam. For instance, in "On the Rainy River," as Frank already has pointed out, when faced with evading the draft by leaving for Canada or reporting to the draft station, the Tim O'Brien narrator claims "I was a coward. I went to the war" (p. 61). This seemingly inverse definition of cowardice unsettles students—especially those who came to maturity after 9/11/2001, the late-2001 American invasion of Afghanistan, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq—who have been led to believe that cowardice would instead have meant fleeing to Canada. They are intrigued, too, especially the men, by a Selective Service that would draft someone like themselves, a (soon-to-be) college graduate. Other contexts of the War also are included as subject matter, as the novel visits questions of identity, among them race, gender, sexuality, social class and able-bodiedness, all enabling different theoretical perspectives. The novel's artifact status also raises issues about the condition of American cultural, literary, and historical sensibilities in the 1980s and 1990s, the era of its writing and publication. On this cultural basis, students can read the novel both as a testimony to what occurred during the War and also as signifier of why the book was published decades later, readings that can lead to substantial research projects. In composition classes, the novel can be used to examine the rhetoric of composing a self, as the narrator of *The Things They Carried* in frequent moments of self-awareness constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs himself, his audience, and his "truth." Thus, the novel can be read meta-fictionally as modeling for composition students how a writer develops a voice in concert with audience expectations and needs about a particular subject, in this case, the Vietnam War.

What works especially well in my teaching the novel as a piece of fiction, though, is to integrate reading the text as a cultural artifact with reading it as a piece of rhetoric. That is, students study the novel for what it says and why about the period represented and how it says that. Thus, just as Frank uses the novel *The Things They Carried* in his Psychology class to explore how the narrator psyche (self) is constructed and reconstructed through memory, I use the novel to have my literature students explore how the narrator persona is constructed through rhetoric. This subtle distinction between psyche and persona is important because there are multiple Tim O'Briens connected to the novel: O'Brien the author, O'Brien the narrator, and O'Brien the character. While often it is difficult



for readers to maintain the difference between author and narrator, it is even more difficult with these multiple O'Briens, especially since the narrator refers to himself in first person. This multiplying also is what makes it vital for students to investigate the rhetorical construction of the O'Brien persona: why is first person used and what is its effect on our understanding of the War and its identitarian contexts? The post-war introduction of multiple ways of examining a text through critical theories made it possible, I argue with my students, for O'Brien to write such a self-aware novel and for us to approach it from non-traditional literary vantage points.

While the text disrupts many received ideas about the War era, at the center of any reading of the novel is author O'Brien's challenging of the notion of "truth," which he does progressively over the course of the novel. Though "truth" was a casualty of the war era—why did we go to war? did LBJ and Robert McNamara lie to the nation about the war's progress? was Vietnamization the exit strategy Richard Nixon promised?—rhetorically analyzing the novel obviates the need to determine the truth of what O'Brien the author or O'Brien the narrator have to say about the War in Vietnam. This approach permits the point of truth or untruth to remain irresolvable, while traditional methods of critique would demand resolution. Frank already has discussed how the verity of memories is always contingent—that memory is a mode of self construction independent of whether events actually happened or not. In addition to having students read non-fiction background material about the War era, to get at this notion of truth I also have them examine how the novel is organized in terms of this question of truth through three stories: "How To Tell a True War Story," "The Man I Killed," and "Good Form." Narrator O'Brien raises the question of verity, of whether or not he is telling the truth, early in the novel in "How to Tell a True War Story" when he asserts:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen ... when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. ... In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. ... In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling. (p. 71)

Students see this cultural paradox of the post-modern world: the language available is inadequate to telling the stories, but already there is a surreal quality to the events themselves, so that what actually happened itself is not conveyable or even credible. Because the stories comprising the novel are organized in a deliberate sequence, O'Brien the author apparently intercedes in this question of verity when he morphs "surreal seemingness" into "story truth" through the other two stories. In the first of them, "The Man I Killed," which is about midway through the novel, the young O'Brien narrator claimed, to himself, anyway, that he killed a young Vietnamese man and felt morally reprehensible for ending all of the possibilities of this man's life (O'Brien, 1990, p. 124). Except for the title of the story, though, the narrator rarely refers to himself as the killer of this Vietnamese man; only through the dialogue of his platoon mates Kiowa and Azar does the reader deduce as she's reading that the narrator was responsible for the killing. (Author O'Brien revisits this tale of the Vietnamese man's death in the following story, "Ambush," from which Frank quotes in the early part of his portion.) Thus, just as the dead man's life had become, in his death, only about possibility and the unknown, the "surreal seemingness," so, too, is the narrator's status as a killer (p. 131). However, the "surreal seemingness" becomes less surreal and more identifiable as "story truth"; many stories and many decades later, in the third story, "Good Form," the middle-aged O'Brien narrator confesses that he did not kill the young Vietnamese man, but the actuality of who did kill him or even whether a Vietnamese man was killed does not matter:

But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even that story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 179)

Coming as it does in the last quarter of the novel, this statement both calls into doubt the veracity of all the stories told previously and also suggests to the reader that the fiction she is reading is a genre perhaps more true than actual occurrences. To this point in the novel, students, who tell me they only know about the War from brief and hurried overviews in high school history classes and blockbuster movies like *Platoon* (Stone, 1986) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), and who already struggle to disentangle author and narrator in reading any fiction, have wanted to read *The Things They Carried* and other Vietnam War fictions as though they were non-fiction. The students want to believe that all veterans suffered in the jungles of Vietnam and still are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They want to believe that all veterans were spat upon on their return to the United States, and that all Americans—excepting the corrupt politicians—were always opposed to the War. They want to believe that an author could not have created such an emotionally moved and moving narrator without the author's having lived the actual life of the narrator. While students mistaking fiction for history or assuming one is less true than the other is a hazard of teaching Vietnam War novels, reading the novel rhetorically and as a cultural artifact obviates the need for the distinction between these two disciplines.

Approaching the text rhetorically helps students separate themselves from the emotionality that Vietnam stories so often conjure and instead permits them to examine what it is the narrator is trying to accomplish in his 1960s context and how the author is affording that in the 1980s. The students do this by being aware that writers have goals, but that the goals only can be accomplished in collaboration with their readers and in the context of the genre being used. In this case, Tim O'Brien the author claims that, though he invented stories like "On the Rainy River,"

That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth....[Though I didn't work in the pig factory the summer before my induction,] the pig factory is there for those dreams of slaughter—they were quite real inside of me. And [though I didn't actually go to the Rainy River and contemplate leaving for Canada,] in my own heart I was certainly on that rainy river, trying to decide what to do, whether to go to the war or not to go to it... . (O'Brien, 1999)

Students learn that author O'Brien invented these stories to illustrate the intangible and illegible feelings he had as a young man in the 1960s. But the question is why the O'Brien author of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* also invented the first-person narrator O'Brien of *The Things They Carried* to tell these stories. Investigating that dilemma is what frees students of their impulse to read the text as what actually happened. The first-person narrator gains both their confidence and their sympathy; despite the narrator's lying in one story—"The Man I Killed"—his later confession and explanation for his untruth in "Good Form" not only expiates in the students' eyes the sin of prevarication he has committed, but also develops their admiration for his openness about the constructedness of his story. Frank has already described this acceptance as his students revising their interpretations of

the narrator's stories of contamination. The difference between our two classes is that the students of memory admire how appropriately the narrator is interpreting and reinterpreting his memories. The students of rhetoric, however, investigate how the narrator accomplishes that reversal by using first-person, by confessing to his fabrications, by manipulating language that is inexact and imprecise, by combining a series of stories that, in their condensed forms, have impact and power. All of these rhetorical devices work first to create skepticism in a readership inclined to believe the myths of the War, and then to construct new myths—about truth, about courage, about patriotism—that appeal to a postmodern audience

In terms of the text as a cultural artifact, the Literature class easily can compare the history texts about the War era to *The Things They Carried*. They can see how history texts don't always broach fully the issues of identity, for instance, that O'Brien's novel does. But students also query why *The Things They Carried* was published in 1990 when many of the stories had been published individually in the 1980s and were about the 1960s. What was it about this latest period, they ask, that would encourage the publication and great success of a novel comprised of many short and short-short stories? Why is it that memory plays such a major role in the content and construction of this novel? What were the American sensibilities at the time of publication that were appealed to by the novel's content and construction? Is it possible that the text was reacting against popular or political sensibilities? Were there other movements at the time that encouraged such a text's publication?

Our discussions of these questions are wide-ranging and they often lead to student research projects. One explanation for the 1990 publication that we return to frequently is that memory of trauma had regained importance as way of explaining many phenomena in various political and scholarly arenas. For instance, in an essay about a then-recently published Tim O'Brien novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, noted Vietnam War literature scholar H. Bruce Franklin (1994) claims that the novel reflected a 1980s political era that made every attempt to deny the horror that was Vietnam. Franklin cites a line from President George H.W. Bush's 1988 inaugural address as the epitome of such deliberate amnesia: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory" (p. 94). Thus, the students might conclude, there was a political desire during the 1980s to forget the War. Simultaneously, however, since 1980, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder had become increasingly accepted by the medical and mainstream communities as a way to explain the continuing and latent impact of trauma. The growing use of this diagnosis over the decade leading up to the publication of *The Things They Carried* suggests to students that, at least in the mental health fields, memory of traumatic events like the Vietnam War was being addressed if not encouraged (Friedman, 2006). In an entirely different venue but in a similar way, one of the five classical canons of rhetoric, memory, was during this period being revalued in the field "with the recognition that the dialectic between recollection and forgetting is a fundamental part of how human beings cope with the world" (Department of Communication, Denison University). Thus, in at least three disparate arenas—politics, mental health, and rhetoric—memory played a significant role in the 1980s. Those events, combined with the burgeoning literary genre of autobiography and memoir in the United States, lead students to conclude that the 1990 publication of *The Things They Carried* was the logical outcome to the decade.

## Memory and Narrative: Psyche and Persona

The conceptual overlap in how our disciplines view memory and narrative has been evident each time Brenda has visited Frank's class on one day to join their discussion about *The Things They Carried*. At that visit, Frank's students have not yet read the entirety of O'Brien's book, but they have already identified several stories that contain examples of the narrator's autobiographical memories and they have discussed the types of psychological functions that these memories represent. The

synthesis that we strive for in this class meeting, in particular, is a discussion of the ways in which our fields address the relationship between "story truth" and "happening truth" that each of us have written about in this paper. To remind them, though, that what they are reading is "story truth" premised on "happening truth," and to promote a discussion of these two truths, Brenda distributes copies of two pages from O'Brien's (1973) memoir, *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, a text that often mirrors stories appearing in the novel. These two pages are excerpted from Chapter Three, "Beginning," and the author paints himself as fearful, embarrassed, and indecisive (pp. 22-23). We use this brief excerpt from the memoir to prompt consideration of how author O'Brien's reported memories in the memoir could have shaped the form and function of narrator O'Brien's stories in the novel. Students then can ponder how the issues of memory accuracy (correspondence) and function (coherence) are relevant to both texts. Furthermore, Frank's students are faced with a real-world dilemma of having to mark boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and between memory and experience as they regard parallel passages in the memoir and the novel. Fundamentally, without our using the word "rhetoric," in this discussion we ask students to consider the function of each of the texts, how the two texts affect them, and why both the memoir and the novel were deemed necessary to inscribing the author's Vietnam War stories.

Moreover, as students see how our two disciplines are in conversation as they become cross-disciplinary, they learn also the value of their liberal arts education. Students come away from our conversation having a better sense of the complexity of such issues as self and identity, experience, culture, and history. In Psychology, Frank sees that many psychological fields (including developmental, social, personality, cognitive, and clinical) have been responsive to a closer examination of narrative functions in psychological processes (Beike, Lampinen, & Behrend, 2004; McAdams, 2001, 2004). Thus, narrative literature can provide a meaningful context for understanding and interpreting personal and subjective experience as well as abstract theoretical concepts (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). The importance of reading a text as a cultural artifact as Brenda has discussed is also exemplified in recent work on autobiographical memory which has identified social and emotional functions of remembering that are grounded in specific cultural and historical contexts (Bluck, 2003; Smith, Bibi, & Sheard, 2003; Wang & Ross, 2005). In English, Brenda finds that current scholarship and pedagogy in the field often crosses disciplinary boundaries, so that fiction can be regarded as an alternative or a complement to history and other fields as it plays an important role in deciphering cultural sensibilities of contemporary periods. As we use one another's texts and venture across traditional disciplinary boundaries in our discussion, our disciplines' explorations of identity formation, in short, seem more complementary than antithetical.

After using *The Things They Carried* we see that though our disciplines and teaching methods vary, we both want students to understand the roles of narrative in the complex world in which they live. Certainly, students in each of our classes gain a keen appreciation for the psychic needs of rememberers and rhetorical needs of readers, and they begin to understand the consequences of using words to describe and interpret the human experience. Most importantly, we want our students to understand how narratives are used to construct one's life, and that one's self is not a fixed and static essence that endures over a lifetime. Instead, these students, whether the first-year students in Franks' class or the upperclass students in Brenda's course, begin to recognize the enormous power and responsibility they have to construct the meanings of their lives. That understanding cannot come from a single viewpoint; students need both literature and psychology. Using memory and rhetoric, psyche and persona, against fixed notions of truth, students learn how fictional characters and their own actual identities can and must be constructed.

## References

- Adams, Hazard, & Searle, Leroy (Eds.) (1986). *Critical theory since 1965*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press.
- Baumeister, Roy, & Newman, Leonard. (1994). How stories make sense of personal experiences: Motives that shape autobiographical narratives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 676-690.
- Beike, Denise, Lampinen, James, & Behrend, Douglass (Eds.) (2004). *The self and memory*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Bluck, Susan. (2003). Autobiographical memory: Exploring its functions in everyday life. *Memory*, 11, 113-123.
- Bruner, Jerome. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54, 11-32.
- Conway, Martin. (2005). Memory and self. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 53, 594-628.
- Conway, Martin, & Pleydell-Pearce, Christopher. (2000). The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system. *Psychological Review*, 107, 261-288.
- Coppola, Francis Ford (Director). (1979). *Apocalypse now* [Motion Picture]. United States: American Zoetrope.
- Department of Communication, Denison University (n.d.). *Rhetoric: The five canons*. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from <http://www.denison.edu/academics/departments/communication/rhetoric.html>
- Edlund, John. (2008). Ancient rhetoric and modern literacy. Retrieved January 7, 2009 from [http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write\\_cn/Index%20Files/Ancient%20Rhetoric%20and%20Modern%20Literacy.pdf](http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/Index%20Files/Ancient%20Rhetoric%20and%20Modern%20Literacy.pdf)
- Franklin, H. Bruce (1994). The plausibility of denial. *The Progressive*, 58(12), 90-94.
- Friedman, Matthew. (2006). Post-traumatic stress disorder: An overview. National Center for PTSD. Retrieved January 10, 2009 from [http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact\\_shts/fsptsd\\_overviewprof.html?opm=1&rr=rr14&srt=d&echorr=true](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fsptsd_overviewprof.html?opm=1&rr=rr14&srt=d&echorr=true)
- Halberstam, Judith. (2005). The death of English. Retrieved July 11, 2006 from <http://insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/2005/05/09/halberstam>
- Haldeman, Joe. (1974). *The forever war*. New York: Avon Books.
- Hall, Mitchell. (2000). *The Vietnam war*. New York: Pearson.
- Heinemann, Larry. (1986). *Paco's story*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Karnow, Stanley. (1983). *Vietnam: A history*. New York: Viking Press.
- Mason, Bobbie Ann. (1985). *In country*. New York: Harper & Row.
- McAdams, Daniel. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 100-122.
- McAdams, Daniel. (2004). The redemptive self: Narrative identity in America today. In Denise Beike, James Lampinen, and Douglass Behrend (Eds.), *The self and memory* (pp. 96-116). New York: Psychology Press.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1973). *If I die in a combat zone, box me up and ship me home*. New York: Broadway Books.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1975). *Northern lights*. New York: Broadway Books.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1978). *Going after Cacciato*. New York: Dell Books.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1985). *The nuclear age*. New York: Knopf.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1994). *In the lake of the woods*. New York: Penguin Books.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1999). Writing Vietnam. Brown University President's Lecture. Retrieved August 3, 2006 from <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WritingVietnam/obrien.html>
- O'Gorman, Farrell. (1998). *The Things They Carried* as composite novel. *War, Literature & the Arts Journal*, 10(2), 289-309.
- Pillemer, David. (1998). *Momentous events, vivid memories*. Cambridge: Harvard University Books.
- Pillemer, David. (2001). Momentous events and the life story. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 123-134.

- Randall, William. (1999). Narrative intelligence and the novelty of our lives. *Journal of Aging Studies, 13*, 11-28.
- Schacter, Daniel. (2001). *The seven sins of memory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Singer, Jefferson, & Blagov, Paul. (2004). The integrative function of narrative processing: Autobiographical memory, self-defining memories, and the life story of identity. In Denise Beike, James Lampinen, and Douglass Behrend (Eds.), *The self and memory* (pp. 117-138). New York: Psychology Press.
- Smith, Marilyn, Bibi, Uri, & Sheard, Erin. (2003). Evidence for the differential impact of time and emotion on personal and event memories for September 11, 2001. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 17*, 1047-1055.
- Stone, Oliver (Director). (1986). *Platoon*. United States: Orion Pictures.
- Sutin, Angelina, & Robins, Richard. (2008). When the "I" looks at the "me": Autobiographical memory, visual perspective, and the self. *Consciousness and Cognition, 17*, 1386-1397.
- Taylor, Mark. (2003). *The Vietnam War in history, literature, and film*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press.
- Wang, Qi, & Ross, Michael. (2005). What we remember and what we tell: The effects of culture and self-priming on memory representations and narratives. *Memory 13*, 594-606.
- Witherell, Carol, & Noddings, Nel. (1991). Prologue: An invitation to our readers. In Carol Witherell & Nel Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 1-12). NY: Teachers College Press.

## Errata

- Jerome Singer [corrected August 24, 2009 to Jefferson Singer].
- Schacter, David [corrected August 24, 2009 to Schacter, Daniel].
- Jerome Singer [corrected August 24, 2009 to Jefferson Singer].

## Contact Information

Frank Hassebrock  
Department of Psychology  
Denison University  
Granville, OH 43023  
Telephone: 740-587-6677  
Email: [hassebrock@denison.edu](mailto:hassebrock@denison.edu)

Brenda Boyle  
Department of English  
Denison University  
Granville, OH 43023  
Telephone: 740-587-5770  
Email: [boyleb@denison.edu](mailto:boyleb@denison.edu)

## Complete APA Citation

Hassebrock, Frank, & Boyle, Brenda. (2009, April 3). Memory and narrative: Reading *The Things They Carried* for psyche and persona. *Across the Disciplines, 6*. Retrieved from [https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/hassebrock\\_boyle2009.pdf](https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/hassebrock_boyle2009.pdf)