

**Міністерство освіти і науки України**  
**Київський національний лінгвістичний університет**  
**Кафедра теорії та історії світової літератури**

**Кваліфікаційна робота магістра**  
**Дискурс війни в романі Тіма О'Брайєна**  
*«Що вони несли з собою»*

Студента групи АС 52-22  
Спеціальності 035 Філологія  
спеціалізація 035.041 Германські  
мови та літератури (переклад  
включно), перша – англійська,  
освітня програма Американські  
студії (англійська мова і друга  
іноземна мова)

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Допущена до захисту  
«17» листопада 2023 року

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Національна шкала \_\_\_\_\_  
Кількість балів: \_\_\_\_\_  
Оцінка ЄКТС \_\_\_\_\_

**Київ – 2023**

**Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine**  
**Kyiv National Linguistic University**  
**Department of Theory and History of World Literature**

**Master's Thesis**

War Discourse in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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035.041 Germanic languages and  
literatures (including translation),  
the first is English, educational  
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Kyiv –2023

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## INTRODUCTION

The depiction of war in literature has been a recurring theme throughout the history of human storytelling. Throughout the course of Western civilization, the occurrence, concept, and practice of warfare have held a significant and symbolic position. Both physical and psychological boundaries have been shaped by the looming presence and implementation of war, casting a profound shadow over the past century, which stands as the bloodiest chapter in the entire story of human history [38]. War serves as a crucible of human experience, where the full spectrum of human emotions, morality, and resilience is put to the test. Tim O'Brien's seminal work, *The Things They Carried*, occupies a distinctive place in the canon of war literature. Out of the vast body of literature, amounting to nearly 30,000 publications on the Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien's works alone have been incorporated into the English curriculum of American middle and high school students [53]. Renowned as one of the foremost contemporary American writers, O'Brien seamlessly weaves his firsthand experiences from the war along with fiction, as evident in his acclaimed and award-winning novels. Dispatched to Vietnam in 1969, during the Nixon administration's commencement of the "Vietnamization" process, O'Brien keenly noted, "By 1969, nobody ever talked about winning... we had been reading enough headlines to absorb the hopelessness of the war [1]".

**The relevance** of the study lies in the context of contemporary literary studies as well as cultural and historic discourse. It contributes to the ongoing discussion surrounding the representation of war experiences in literature and the impact of such narratives on collective memory and identity (re)presentation. Moreover, in an era characterized by continued global conflicts and the lasting effects of past wars, the examination of war literature remains crucial for fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the human condition in times of turmoil. By analyzing O'Brien's work, the diploma offers insights into the

complexities of the Vietnam War and its enduring impact, inviting a reevaluation of the ways in which literature can serve as a means of processing and communicating the profound emotional and psychological realities of warfare.

**The object** of the paper is Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried* (1990).

**The subject matter** of the paper encompasses a detailed exploration of the war discourse in O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried* (1990). It involves an in-depth analysis of the themes, characters, narrative techniques, and the emotional impact of war depicted in the novel.

**The aim** of the study is to offer insights into the human condition during times of conflict and the role of literature in conveying the profound emotional and psychological realities of war.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the profound ways in which Tim O'Brien depicts war discourse in *The Things They Carried* (1990). This seminal work has garnered considerable attention and acclaim, not only for its literary merit but also for its ability to provide a nuanced and deeply human perspective on the Vietnam War. By delving into the intricacies of O'Brien's war picture, this study **aims** to achieve several **tasks**:

- to conduct a comprehensive literary analysis of *The Things They Carried* to unearth the various narrative techniques, thematic elements, and characterizations employed by O'Brien in his portrayal of war;
- to explore the psychological dimensions of war by delving into the trauma, guilt, and moral dilemmas faced by soldiers, shedding light on the emotional toll of combat;
- to examine O'Brien's representation of war in the context of the Vietnam War, to obtain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural backdrop against which the narrative unfolds;

- to research the enduring relevance and legacy of *The Things They Carried* in contemporary discussions about war literature and study how O'Brien's stories help to deal with trauma obtained during conflict.

The research of trauma in the novel was based on the writings by Cathy Caruth [8], Julian D. Ford and Damion J. Grasso [16], Maurice Halbwach [10], Shoshana Felman [15], Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman [14] and Judith Herman [24].

The metafiction theoretic background was analyzed with the help of the works by Rüdiger Imhof [26], William H. Gass [17], Patricia Waugh [54], Ann Jefferson [29], Mark Currie [11], John Barth [3].

The research of Tim O'Brien and his novels carried out by Philip Douglas Beidler [4], Maria Bonn [7], Mark Heberle [22], Tobey Herzog [25], Philip Jason [28], Steven Kaplan [31] [30], Elizabeth Yoon [57] served the background for the author's war discourse specificity exploration.

**Theoretical value** of the paper lies in a multidimensional approach to war discourse by examining how O'Brien constructs the narrative of war and the way he incorporates postmodern and metafictional elements.

**Practical value** of the research is that its results can be used for lectures and practical lessons in American studies and American literature in particular.

**The novelty** of the study lies in combining literary analysis with insights from fields such as trauma studies, cultural history, and narrative theory, the research presents a holistic and interdisciplinary examination of the depiction of war in Tim O'Brien's work.

**The Introduction** outlines the relevance of the research, its object and subject-matter, aim and tasks, the material, the theoretical and practical value of results obtained.

Chapter One “War literature: from its origin to contemporary dimension” provides a review of theoretical issues related to the research; delves into war literature background and history; defines the concept of metafiction and narrative presented by Tim O’Brien.

Chapter Two “War discourse in O’Brien’s novel *The Things They Carried*” aims at the analysis of Tim O’Brien book *The Things They Carried*.

General Conclusions gives a brief overview of the main results of the research.

## **CHAPTER 1. WAR LITERATURE: from its ORIGIN to CONTEMPORARY DIMENSION**

### **1.1. Representation of war in literature, from the “Lost Generation” to Metafiction**

World War I, often referred to as the Great War, left an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of an entire generation. Prior to World War I, there existed a prevailing sense of optimism and idealism, particularly among the intellectual and artistic communities. The war, however, shattered these romanticized notions, revealing the stark brutality and senseless carnage that lay beneath the surface of human civilization. Writers who had once espoused lofty ideals and romantic visions of the world now grappled with the stark reality of human nature, questioning the very foundations of progress, morality, and the inherent goodness of humanity. As the conflict raged across Europe from 1914 to 1918, its unprecedented scale and brutality shattered the illusions of glory and honor that had long accompanied warfare. In the aftermath of the bloodshed, the world was left reeling, struggling to make sense of the carnage and the profound loss that had engulfed it. The repercussions of the war were not confined to the physical devastation of the battlegrounds; they also permeated the emotional and psychological landscapes of the survivors, fostering a pervasive sense of disillusionment and alienation. Out of the wreckage of World War I emerged a group of writers who would come to be known as the Lost Generation. This appellation, coined by Gertrude Stein, she heard that phrase from a French garage mechanic, who been working with her car, "That is what you are. That's what you all are ... all of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation [23]" this phrase encapsulated the sentiment of aimlessness and disillusionment that pervaded the post-war era. The Lost Generation writers, characterized by their disillusionment and quest for meaning amidst the wreckage of the war, formed a



literary movement that profoundly influenced the trajectory of modern literature. At the forefront of the Lost Generation stood literary luminaries whose works encapsulated the spirit of their time, portraying the struggles, anxieties, and existential crises that plagued the post-war generation. Notable among these figures were Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose literary contributions would come to define the essence of the Lost Generation's literary canon.

The literature of the Lost Generation serves as a poignant reflection of the collective disillusionment and existential crisis experienced by a generation that had witnessed the horrors of war and the subsequent societal disintegration. The disillusionment expressed in the literature of the Lost Generation is multifaceted. It stems from the shattered ideals and values that were previously held in high esteem, revealing the stark contrast between the pre-war optimism and the post-war reality. Authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, in "The Great Gatsby," depict the disillusionment with the illusory American Dream, exposing the emptiness and moral decay that lurked beneath the surface of the Jazz Age society. F. Scott Fitzgerald's characters, often consumed by materialism and hedonism, yearn for a deeper sense of purpose and fulfillment, ultimately finding themselves disillusioned with the superficial trappings of success and happiness [42]. This disillusionment is further reflected in the works of Ernest Hemingway, who often presents disillusioned characters grappling with the sense of purposelessness and the futility of existence in the face of a chaotic and indifferent world [44]. Characters are portrayed as disconnected from society, relationships, and even themselves. This alienation is often a result of the traumatic experiences of war, which have left them emotionally scarred and struggling to reintegrate into civilian life. Central to the literature of the Lost Generation is the quest for meaning in a world that seems devoid of purpose and certainty. Authors grapple with existential questions and the search for personal identity amidst the chaos and instability of the post-war period.

Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" shows characters searching for meaning and identity in the aftermath of war, struggling to find purpose in a world that has been irrevocably altered. His writing style is characterized by minimalism, a deliberate economy of words, and the use of the "iceberg theory." This theory suggests that the deeper, more profound themes and emotions are submerged beneath the surface of the text, much like the bulk of an iceberg hidden beneath the water [49]. Hemingway's writing in this novel is marked by sparse description and dialogue, allowing readers to infer deeper meanings and emotions. For instance, he often conveys emotions through what is left unsaid or through the subtext of the characters' interactions. The minimalist style and iceberg theory serve to emphasize the novel's themes of disillusionment and existential angst. They require readers to engage actively with the text, encouraging them to draw their conclusions and insights about the characters' inner struggles and the true nature of their relationships.

There is no limit for human cruelty, World War II stands as one of the most cataclysmic events in human history, leaving an indelible mark on the global cultural and intellectual landscape. The emergence of existentialist themes in literature during this period offered a powerful lens through which to explore the complexities of human existence, the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world, and the profound moral and philosophical questions that arose in the aftermath of the war [19]. In the wake of unprecedented devastation and the revelation of the darkest facets of human nature, writers grappled with the existential dilemmas that defined the post-war world.

Existentialism, as a philosophical and literary movement, gained prominence in the post-war era, serving as a response to the disillusionment, trauma, and moral ambiguity that characterized the global landscape. Influenced by the works of existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, writers sought to grapple with the absurdity of human existence, the nature of personal responsibility, and the profound challenges of navigating a

world fraught with uncertainty and despair. The existentialist themes that permeated literature after World War II were characterized by a profound exploration of the human psyche, the nature of freedom and choice, and the inherent tension between individual agency and the constraints imposed by society and circumstance [51]. Authors used their works to delve into the existential crises of identity, purpose, and the search for authentic meaning in a world that had been irrevocably altered by the horrors of war.

One of the predominant themes in existentialist literature after World War II was the exploration of the absurdity of human existence. Authors like Albert Camus, in his philosophical novel "The Myth of Sisyphus," contemplated the plight of Sisyphus, condemned to endlessly roll a rock up a hill, only to watch it roll back down. This imagery of ceaseless, meaningless labor became a powerful metaphor for the human condition, illustrating the futility of human endeavors and the sense of existential absurdity that pervaded the post-war era [41]. Similarly, the works of Franz Kafka, such as "The Trial" and "The Metamorphosis," depicted protagonists trapped in surreal and nonsensical circumstances, highlighting the inherent meaninglessness and incomprehensibility of the world around them [12]. Existentialist literature grappled with the moral ambiguities of human actions, emphasizing the inherent ethical complexities that individuals faced in a world devoid of absolute values or objective truths. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his play "No Exit," presented characters condemned to spend eternity in a room together, each grappling with their own moral failings and confronting the consequences of their past actions [48]. Sartre's exploration of the choices individuals make and the moral responsibility they bear in a world without inherent meaning underscored the pervasive moral ambiguity that defined the human experience in the post-war era. Works of existentialist authors often depicted characters navigating the existential crises of identity, freedom, and personal agency in a world characterized by uncertainty and despair. These characters were frequently confronted with the burden of making choices in the absence of predetermined meaning or moral

guidelines. They grappled with the consequences of their actions, often facing the realization that their choices were ultimately arbitrary, leading to an acute sense of moral ambiguity and the questioning of traditional ethical frameworks [34].

Albert Camus' novel "The Stranger" is often considered a quintessential work of existential literature, exploring the themes of alienation, absurdity, and the meaninglessness of human existence [20]. While the novel itself is not explicitly about war, its existentialist underpinnings can be understood within the context of the aftermath of World War II, a time marked by widespread disillusionment and the struggle to find meaning in a world shattered by conflict. Camus, who was involved in the French Resistance during the war, uses the protagonist Meursault to delve into the existential crisis that often arises in the wake of war. "The Stranger" presents Meursault as a character who embodies a profound sense of detachment from the world around him, "Meursault believes in the meaninglessness of life and he acts accordingly, a thing that makes him feel a 'stranger' among his people [33]". His indifference to societal norms, emotional detachment, and refusal to conform to social expectations make him an outsider, reflecting the alienation and disconnection many experienced during and after the war. Meursault's apathetic demeanor can be seen as a response to the trauma and horror witnessed during the war, leading to an existential outlook that questions the fundamental meaning and purpose of human existence.

The novel's opening lines immediately establish Meursault's emotional detachment, as he describes his mother's death with a surprising lack of grief or remorse. This emotional indifference, which persists throughout the novel, serves as a symbol of the emotional desensitization that can occur as a result of exposure to the atrocities of war. Meursault's inability to conform to societal norms of grief and mourning reflects the profound alienation and detachment experienced by many individuals who struggled to reconcile the brutality of war with their own sense of humanity. The existential themes in "The Stranger" can be seen as a response to the existential crisis that war often induces. The novel challenges the

conventional notions of meaning and purpose, highlighting the absurdity and chaos of human existence. Meursault's narrative is characterized by a lack of inherent meaning and purpose, emphasizing the sense of futility and disillusionment.

In addition to Meursault's individual existential crisis, the novel also explores broader existential questions through its portrayal of the justice system [21]. Meursault's trial and subsequent conviction can be interpreted as a critique of the arbitrary nature of justice, reflecting the moral ambiguity and chaos that often accompany wartime. The absurdity of the trial, where Meursault's actions unrelated to the murder itself, such as his emotional detachment during his mother's funeral, are used against him, highlights the human tendency to impose order and meaning on inherently chaotic and senseless situations, a theme resonant with the chaos and moral ambiguity of war. Meursault's confrontation with the chaplain in the final pages of the novel encapsulates the overarching existentialist themes present throughout the narrative. Meursault's rejection of the chaplain's offer of spiritual solace and his steadfast refusal to accept religious consolation reflect the existential struggle to find meaning and purpose in a seemingly meaningless world. This rejection signifies the protagonist's commitment to embracing the absurdity of existence and rejecting the false comfort of external meaning, resonating with the broader existential crisis that emerged in the aftermath of the war. Camus' depiction of Meursault's existential journey in "The Stranger" serves as a reflection of the broader post-war existentialist discourse. The novel invites readers to contemplate the human experience in a world that appears irrational and indifferent, mirroring the sense of disillusionment and nihilism prevalent in the aftermath of World War II. Meursault's existential detachment and rejection of societal norms exemplify the struggle to find meaning in a world shattered by conflict and chaos, highlighting the profound impact of war on the human psyche.

Next literature movement was sparked by Vietnam War, a protracted conflict that spanned from 1955 to 1975, it was not only a significant military engagement but also a pivotal event that triggered widespread social and cultural

upheaval in the United States, described by Fredric Jameson as “The first terrible postmodern war cannot be told in the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie [27]”, this tumultuous period saw a profound shift in American society, sparking intense debates about the government's foreign policy, the ethics of warfare, and the role of the United States in global conflicts. This era of political and social turmoil also gave rise to a body of literature that sought to grapple with the complexities and ramifications of the Vietnam War, with authors like Tim O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut and Michael Herr offering reflections on the war's impact on American society. The Vietnam War served as a catalyst for social and cultural change, provoking a widespread sense of disillusionment and dissent among the American public [45]. As the war escalated, so too did anti-war sentiment, leading to a growing divide between those who supported the government's military intervention and those who vehemently opposed it. This polarization of public opinion fueled a wave of protests, demonstrations, and social movements that challenged traditional notions of patriotism and national identity. The war's controversies prompted Americans to reevaluate their values, beliefs, and attitudes toward authority, resulting in a profound reexamination of the country's political and moral foundations, “The Vietnam War was in many ways a wild and terrible work of fiction written by some dangerous and frightening storytellers. First the United States decided what constituted good and evil, right and wrong, civilized and uncivilized, freedom and oppression for Vietnam, according to American standards; then it traveled the long physical distance to Vietnam and attempted to make its own notions about these things clear to the Vietnamese people – ultimately by brute, technological force [30]”.

In response to the war's profound impact on American society, a new wave of literature emerged that sought to confront the complexities and ambiguities of the Vietnam War experience. Writers like Tim O'Brien and Kurt Vonnegut played pivotal roles in shaping the literary discourse surrounding the war, offering nuanced and deeply introspective narratives that captured the psychological and

emotional toll of combat, as well as the broader societal repercussions of the conflict.

### **1.1. The concepts of trauma and memory: its interrelation and typology**

The exploration of trauma in humanitarian contexts gained scientific attention in the latter half of the 20th century. Trauma was scrutinized through historical, cultural, sociological, and literary lenses.

In this academic pursuit, influential figures like Caruth and Freud immersed themselves in unraveling the complexities of war trauma and its profound psychological impacts. Their perspectives framed war trauma as a distinct phenomenon shaped not only by individual experiences but also by broader societal and historical conditions. Caruth, in particular, emphasized the dynamic nature of trauma comprehension, asserting that the identification of more PTSD symptoms challenges existing understanding methods [8]. This evolution prompted interdisciplinary involvement, with psychoanalysis, media-centric psychiatry, sociology, history, and literature collectively summoned to navigate, elucidate, and treat the intricate nuances of trauma. The phenomenon of trauma, with its expansive reach, demonstrated a remarkable capacity to transcend conventional boundaries, continually challenging the limits of comprehension.

Contemporary cultural figures continue to depict trauma, emphasizing themes of resistance against military apparatus. Sociocultural aspects of war trauma, such as desertion, refusal of military duty, and self-abnegation, are crucial issues explored by modern cultural figures.

Within the realm of literature, authors actively sought to meaningfully depict trauma by delving into the recesses of the human subconscious. This intentional approach aimed to sidestep the pitfalls of politicization and ideologization often associated with trauma. Literary studies assumed a central role in prioritizing the analysis of the psyches of individuals traumatized by war or disasters. Techniques such as "stream of consciousness," "inner speech," non-proprietary direct speech,

and narrative structural innovations became instrumental in these studies. Through these literary endeavors, writers aimed to provide accurate representations of both conscious and subconscious processes, capturing the nuanced emotional experiences and impulses tied to trauma.

The trauma paradigm extends its influence far beyond the realm of literature, finding application in the studies conducted by sociologists and psychologists examining the transformative effects of wars. Trauma theory serves as a valuable tool for probing into psychosocial consequences, enabling an exploration of the shifts in global, individual, and collective consciousness. This paradigm becomes crucial for the comprehensive investigation of prevailing societal moods and the intricate analysis of their repercussions on both communities and individuals.

In the field of sociology, trauma is conceptualized as a form of societal damage, analogous to a wound inflicted upon a living organism – society itself. While psychiatry and psychology tend to approach trauma as an individual ailment, the concept of social trauma unfolds on a collective scale, affecting social groups, collectives, or even entire societies.

The sudden and often counterproductive emergence of radical changes disrupts established ways of life, compelling individuals to venture beyond their comfort zones characterized by stability, tradition, and confidence in the future. This disruption, in turn, results in a profound loss of existential security within society. The ensuing economic, social, and cultural shifts can contribute to the erosion of traditional values, a decline in living standards, and the restructuring of societal frameworks. It is within this exploration of trauma that the theory of cultural trauma emerges, defining socio-cultural trauma as the outcome of radical and profound social changes [50].

The trajectory of trauma proves to be intricate, lacking clear demarcations between its onset and resolution. Operating at its own pace, trauma traverses diverse phases and manifestations, occurring both during and after traumatic



events. The structural conditions conducive to traumatic sequences encompass a painful past, persistent external and internal conflicts within society, and the political or ideological dominance of an adversary state. This complex interplay creates an environment that fosters traumatic experiences. As articulated by Ford, countries and nations exposed to the ravages of war, occupation, or genocide, along with individuals grappling with mental or personality disorders, emerge as particularly susceptible to the profound impacts of trauma [16].

The paradigm of historical sociology places emphasis on the idea that social processes unfold within inherited structural frameworks, being influenced by both past and contemporary factors. Current social practices play a pivotal role in shaping future outcomes, creating either favorable or constraining conditions for societal development.

Maurice Halbwachs, a notable researcher, provides a nuanced perspective on history, asserting that it extends beyond written records, encompassing a living dimension that persists or undergoes rejuvenation over time. This living history contains numerous erstwhile currents, seemingly depleted but revitalized after years. Halbwachs suggests that individuals have the agency to reconstruct this historical ambiance by drawing on various artifacts such as books, engravings, and paintings. These subtle traces manifest in expressions, physical spaces, and even in the nuanced thoughts and feelings unconsciously retained and reproduced within different societies and environments [10].

On one hand, the narrative of change's outcomes is crafted by scientists, artists, writers, and journalists, presenting both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. This narrative permeates mass media, literature, theatrical performances, and cinema. In instances where a negative narrative gains traction, signs of trauma emerge within society, triggering both active and passive responses to the trauma. The active commemoration of tragic historical events at the start of the 21st century contributes significantly to the formation of collective memory and identity. In the context of grand narratives disintegrating, these

commemorations hold particular significance in the contemporary literary landscape. The concept of traumatized consciousness is now prominently featured not only in academic circles and literature but also in cinema, evident in remarkable films addressing the trauma of Vietnam, such as "Apocalypse Now" and "Full Metal Jacket." This multifaceted engagement with trauma reflects the evolving landscape of collective memory and its intertwining with various forms of artistic expression.

David Blythe argues that the profound tragedies of the 20th century serve as the underlying catalyst for the global fascination with collective memory. He contends that, in response to these traumatic events, society must engage in processes of healing, honoring, reasoning, or, at the very least, understanding and explaining the traumatic past [6]. This growing interest in collective memory prompted the swift emergence of a new interdisciplinary science in the West, driven by active public demand. The term "collective memory" itself was coined by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. Halbwachs posits that history, viewed as a form of collective memory, extends beyond a mere chronological sequence of events and dates. Instead, it encompasses everything that distinguishes one period from another. To comprehend the historical reality behind this narrative, one must transcend individual boundaries, adopt the group's perspective, and understand how specific events attain memorable status within the realm of national concerns, interests, and passions. However, this shift marks the moment when personal impressions become disentangled from historical facts, leading to a renewed encounter with historical frameworks [10].

Situated within a philosophical paradigm, trauma theory adopts a post-structuralist perspective and was formulated by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. Their work not only mirrors deconstruction in vocabulary and idiom but also aligns with its overall approach. Noteworthy contributions include K. Caruth's book "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" [9] and S. Felman's chapters in the monograph *Testimony: The Crisis of Testimony in Literature*,

Psychoanalysis, and History [15], featuring a substantial exploration of poststructuralist philosophy of language influenced by deconstruction. This intersection of trauma theory with broader philosophical paradigms reflects a profound engagement with language, narrative, and historical understanding in the context of traumatic experiences..

Poststructuralism significantly shapes the concept of language and representation in the works of Felman and Caruth, particularly in their exploration of trauma. Caruth emphasizes the performative nature of language, shedding light on how a traumatic event can act as a "mortal rupture," disrupting the conventional language of expression and remaining elusive, only to be felt rather than understood.

Felman and Caruth lay the groundwork for the theory of literary trauma by proposing the idea of the "inherent belatedness" of trauma. They posit that a traumatic event is not immediately experienced but transforms into trauma through "recurrent, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors arising from the event [9]". According to the post-structuralist philosophy of trauma, it is inherently unimaginable and unspeakable, eluding conventional systems of language, knowledge, and narrative designed for conveying information. This philosophical stance is rooted in specific assumptions about how stories are experienced and comprehended.

Despite their significant contributions, Caruth's critics highlight the empirical assumptions underpinning her approach. They argue that she presupposes a direct impact of traumatic experiences on the mind and brain, even though this impact typically remains inaccessible to consciousness. Caruth consistently emphasizes the "directness" and "immediacy" of the mind's registration of a traumatic event, suggesting that "the very direct vision of a violent event can occur as an absolute inability to recognize it [9]".

However, it's crucial to note that within trauma research, a substantial portion of poststructuralist influence remains implicit, and critics argue that this approach lacks a thorough examination of the empirical and hermeneutic assumptions underlying the theory of trauma. The debate surrounding the explicit and implicit philosophical underpinnings adds layers of complexity to the exploration of trauma within poststructuralist frameworks.

In exploring fiction related to trauma, there exists a spectrum wherein certain texts overtly engage with the theme of trauma. This is evident in works like Patrick McGrath's *Trauma* [35], which not only popularizes PTSD theory but also delves into the distinctive temporality of trauma. The narrative portrays trauma as an event unfolding in the present, with each recurrence experienced as if for the first time.

Christine E. Hallett delves into World War I nurses' traumatology, examining their "philosophy of trauma" concerning how they attribute meaning or meaninglessness to the suffering of their patients [18]. Traumatology, akin to life writing, encompasses diverse ways of engaging with traumatic experiences, spanning from fictional and imaginary to non-fictional realms, often relying on literary devices and narrative strategies.

One discourse on trauma, embedded in fiction, articulates a concealed philosophy of trauma while narrating the traumatic experience. Modernist and postmodernist fiction employs specific textual strategies. These strategies enable the performative expression of trauma through fragmented, non-linear narratives that emphasize broken time intervals, absence, gaps, and silences, indirectly conveying the unspeakable.

This aesthetic posits the traumatic experience as inherently unknowable and incomprehensible. However, other literary works on trauma challenge this notion of the unknowable which underscores the mediation of traumatic experiences.

Poststructuralist scholars in trauma theory not only propose that trauma is inherently beyond descriptive comprehension but also assert the ethical predicament of employing narrative forms to make sense of traumatic experiences. This ethical dilemma arises from the attempt to force an irreversibly exceptional event into a discourse that assimilates it, encompassing it within a shared meaning or explanation.

Caruth, exemplifying this perspective, posits that storytelling involves forgetting the uniqueness of the recounted event. She identifies the ethical potential of the narrative in the very language it employs and in the interruption of understanding [9].

The exploration of trauma reveals that it is not an immediate, isolated occurrence but rather a nuanced and multi-layered phenomenon that can become intricately woven into an individual's daily life. It surpasses the boundaries of a single devastating event, becoming an enduring aspect of some individuals' realities. Thus, understanding a traumatic experience should go beyond disruption to encompass its broader destructiveness, acknowledging that traumatic experiences exist along a spectrum, much like various facets of life.

The qualification of an experience as traumatic depends less on its seamless integration into one's personal narrative and more on the harm inflicted upon the experiencer, eroding their sense of free will and self-esteem. This harm is recognized as a fundamental condition for injury. Narrative attempts to comprehend trauma, however, confront inherent ethical and epistemological challenges. Recognizing diverse ways of understanding narrative, ranging from subjective (appropriative, generalizing) to non-subjective (guided by an ethic of learning, openness, and dialogue), allows for the acknowledgment that narrative understanding can be ethically sustainable. It serves as a potential avenue for overcoming a traumatic experience or empathetically envisioning the suffering of others.

An examination of an ordinary person's life illustrates that trauma can distort one's narrative sense of self. Strengthening narrative activity involves learning to reassess the past and envisage an alternative future. While this transformation may not always be feasible, especially under the weight of a traumatic past, it occurs within dialogic relationships with others. In this dialogue, culturally available affective, figurative, narrative, and other resources play a pivotal role in facilitating healing and transformation. This intricate interplay between narrative and trauma underscores the complex nature of the human experience in the face of profound challenges.

The exploration and understanding of trauma, particularly in the context of individuals who have experienced catastrophic or shocking events, have been ongoing endeavors throughout history. However, the ability of historians, especially those focused on events from the distant past, to directly engage with eyewitnesses and observe the lasting impact of trauma is often limited. This limitation results in a scarcity of historical works that comprehensively delve into the repercussions of both extreme and less significant historical occurrences on individuals.

In instances where historians do address trauma, they frequently adopt an external perspective, treating it superficially as a tragic, man-made event or a natural disaster without delving into the intricacies of the experiences involved. This approach obstructs access to the genuine past experiences of trauma victims, reflecting a relatively casual and non-comprehensive attitude towards the study of trauma.

This casual approach has prompted a shift in perspective, with new historians in the 20th and 21st centuries actively engaging in a more comprehensive exploration of trauma. This era has witnessed the emergence of scholars, writers, and public figures such as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, whose work, "Empire of Trauma," highlights the significant evolution of trauma as a unique way of assigning traces of history and how over the past twenty-five

years, trauma has become one of the dominant ways through which our relationship with the past is presented and understood, emphasizing its profound impact on shaping historical narratives and collective memory [14].

A mere century ago, the term "trauma" made its first appearance in describing the mental distress symptoms of individuals affected by railway and industrial accidents. Its initial utilization was confined to the medical domain. However, as the 20th century unfolded, trauma evolved into a recognized and multifaceted issue, subjected to systematic study and theorization by scientists across various disciplines, including psychoanalysis, psychology, psychiatry, and neurobiology. The prolonged exploration of trauma was primarily facilitated by the personal accounts of soldiers who endured severe mental blows, occasionally recovering from their traumatic experiences.

In the early 1980s, after extensive debates on the profound and diverse psychiatric expressions of trauma, the medical community officially embraced and implemented the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although the experiences of Vietnam veterans played a pivotal role in establishing PTSD, its recognition and significance for other individuals, such as victims of rape or those who suffered child abuse, were notably slow to gain traction, despite the term's widespread use in legal contexts. This slow recognition highlights the historical context in which trauma, once limited to certain domains like war-related experiences, gradually expanded to encompass a broader range of human experiences, necessitating a more inclusive understanding of its impact across various contexts and individuals.

Judith Herman's groundbreaking feminist exploration *Trauma and Recovery* [24] stands as a pivotal moment in psychiatric literature, challenging the prevailing notion that trauma exclusively impacted war victims, predominantly men. Herman's work played a crucial role in broadening the understanding of trauma, asserting that victims of rape, abuse, and other heinous acts affecting women and children also endure the profound impact of trauma as a shared human condition.

Drawing extensively from her clinical practice, Herman underscored the commonality of obsessive symptoms among these diverse victims, ranging from night terrors and panic attacks to phobias, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and outbursts of rage. Additionally, they grappled with heightened negative emotions, including shame, guilt, and self-hatred. Burdened by these intrusive symptoms, these individuals often suffered in silence, with their plight misunderstood and unheard.

While trauma gained popularity beyond the realms of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and social work, scholars in the humanities, particularly historians, were initially slow to recognize trauma as a central concern in humanitarianism. The reluctance of many luminaries in the humanities to understand the psychological state of unfortunate individuals within their purview became a challenge. However, the close of the 20th century prompted a reevaluation of this stance among numerous scholars, marking a shift toward a more comprehensive acknowledgment of trauma's impact across diverse human experiences and contexts..

### **1.3 Tim O'Brien as a Metafictional Writer**

The literary world has witnessed the emergence of numerous authors who have pushed the boundaries of traditional storytelling. Tim O'Brien, an American writer renowned for his works on the Vietnam War, stands out prominently in this context due to his distinctive metafictional approach to narrative. This chapter delves into the reasons why Tim O'Brien is regarded as a metafictional writer, analyzing the key elements and techniques present in his literary works that contribute to this classification.

Before delving into O'Brien's metafictional tendencies, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of the term "metafiction" or how Robert Scholes described it as "ethically controlled fantasy." Metafiction is a term that has gained prominence in literary criticism and analysis, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is a genre of literature that self-consciously and deliberately draws



attention to its own fictional nature, blurring the lines between reality and fiction [26]. The historical evolution of metafiction is pretty long. It is not a recent literary phenomenon; it has its roots in various literary traditions and can be traced back to ancient texts and myths. However, the term "metafiction" itself became widely recognized and discussed in the mid-20th century, thanks in part to the works of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and John Barth, first time described by William H. Gass in his book [17]. These writers experimented with storytelling in ways that brought the act of writing and reading to the forefront. In the postmodern era, metafiction became a prominent feature of literature, and it was used to comment on the nature of fiction, reality, and the act of storytelling itself [54]. Authors like Salman Rushdie, Italo Calvino, and Kurt Vonnegut continued to push the boundaries of traditional narrative structures, making readers question the very essence of storytelling.

Bur here is the catch, utilizing the term "metafiction" to encompass both contemporary works with profound self-awareness and those with minimal self-conscious elements results in ambiguity. Ann Jefferson in her assessment of Patricia Waugh's work *Metafiction The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, contends that "the issue lies in Waugh's dual approach, attempting to depict metafiction as an innate trait of narrative fiction and as a reaction to the current social and cultural climate [29]". According to Ann Jefferson, Patricia Waugh also presents an extensive definition by characterizing metafiction as "fictional writing that deliberately draws attention to its artificial nature to raise inquiries about the interplay between fiction and reality" and believes that metafictional works are those that "explore a theory of writing fiction through the act of writing fiction [29]". Meanwhile John Barth offers a succinct overarching definition of metafiction as a "novel that mimics a novel rather than reality [3]". Mark Currie underscores the contemporary metafiction's inclination toward self-critique, describing it as "an intermediary discourse, a form of writing that positions itself on the boundary between fiction and criticism, taking this boundary

as its subject [11]”. Despite the nuanced distinctions in their definitions, most theorists concur that metafiction cannot be labeled as a genre or as the definitive mode of postmodern fiction.

Among all features some key characteristics of metafiction can be highlighted:

a. **Self-Reflexivity:** Metafictional works often include elements that refer to themselves as works of fiction. This may involve characters acknowledging that they are in a story, narrators breaking the fourth wall, or even the text discussing its own creation.

b. **Playful Narrative Techniques:** Metafiction frequently employs unconventional narrative techniques, such as fragmented narratives, non-linear storytelling, and unreliable narrators. These techniques challenge the reader's expectations and encourage a more active engagement with the text.

c. **Exploration of Authorship:** Metafiction often explores the role of the author in shaping the narrative. It questions the authority of the author and may even present multiple layers of authorship within the same work.

d. **Blurring of Fiction and Reality:** Metafiction intentionally blurs the line between fiction and reality. Characters may exist in both worlds, and readers are left to question the boundaries between the two.

e. **Commentary on the Nature of Fiction:** Metafictional works often engage in a self-reflective commentary on the nature of fiction, storytelling, and the act of reading itself. They may question the reliability of narrative, the subjectivity of truth, and the role of interpretation.

Tim O'Brien employs an extensive use of metafiction as his primary method for exploring the origins and significance of fiction. Metafiction serves as a means for him to delve into the intricacies of storytelling through his characters and narrative voice. O'Brien's use of metafiction experiments with narrative structures,

the nature of artistry, the interplay between reality and fiction, and the author's position as a storyteller.

While Tim O'Brien has authored a total of seven books, this study excludes four of his works that do not primarily center on the art of storytelling. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a nonfiction memoir that, although incorporating self-referential writing, primarily addresses themes beyond storytelling. Similarly, *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age* incorporate elements of metafiction but largely focus on subjects other than storytelling. "Tomcat in Love," while an intriguing exploration of language and interpersonal relationships, prioritizes the broader aspects of language rather than storytelling, thus falling outside the scope of this study. Thorough and meticulous analysis of the texts is imperative to unveil the intricate layers of O'Brien's metafiction. At times, deconstructing the fundamental elements of fiction, such as plot and characters, is necessary to comprehend O'Brien's underlying ideas. These three novels utilize similar techniques to convey O'Brien's perspectives on storytelling, employing diverse narratives to express these notions in various ways.

This study focuses on O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* but to get full picture it is important to mention other stories with self-referential narrative style, identifying common themes that he conveys through different narrative approaches. By closely examining *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* individually and scrutinizing the distinct ways each narrative presents these ideas we develop a comprehensive understanding of O'Brien's beliefs about the nature of war, its origins.

At the narrative level, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* are distinct works addressing disparate subject matters; however, metafiction and the art of storytelling serve as central themes in each narrative. "Going After Cacciato" is a Vietnam War novel set entirely within the recollections and fantasies of a soldier in Vietnam. *The Things They Carried* comprises interlinked short episodes taking place in Vietnam and the United

States, both during and after the war. In *The Lake of the Woods*, set entirely in America, revisits events from the protagonist's involvement in Vietnam two decades earlier. Despite differing plotlines, the primary characters in each work employ storytelling as a means of escapism and survival in their respective circumstances. O'Brien portrays these characters using storytelling as a shield against harsh realities they cannot confront, enabling them to elude the adversities they confront. Through fabrication, imagination, and daydreaming, O'Brien's characters find solace in crafting narratives that shield them from unbearable truths. O'Brien introduces two distinct forms of truth in his work: "happening-truths," representing the events in reality, and "story-truths," depicting the events within the narrative construct [5]. Despite being used to conceal happening-truths, stories do not become inherently untrue; instead, they create an alternate reality of story-truths, serving to reflect or supplant the happening-truths. In this way, story-truths establish their own reality, demonstrating the capacity of storytelling to create its own truths.

Within each of the three texts, the main characters utilize storytelling in a dual capacity, employing narratives as both a refuge from grim realities and a means of concealing unpleasant truths. In "Going After Cacciato" Paul Berlin invents a story-truth during a night at an observation post, allowing himself a temporary escape from the harsh realities of his situation. Meanwhile, the narrator of *The Things They Carried*, a fictional soldier named Tim O'Brien (distinct from the real-life fiction writer Tim O'Brien), crafts several story-truths that may or may not contradict the fictional happening-truths within the narrative construct. These constructed narratives might significantly differ from any happening-truths in the life of the author Tim O'Brien. Tim O'Brien, the character, serves as the narrator and focal point of the narrative. This allows O'Brien to reflect upon his own experiences during the Vietnam War while maintaining a level of distance from his real-life self. Duality complicates the relationship between author and narrator, inviting readers to question who is truly responsible for the narrative's

construction. This depiction not only effectively captures the moral paradoxes defining the Vietnam War, and potentially any war, but also offers a poignant insight into how stories can serve as a shield against realities too burdensome and painful to confront. Similarly, in "In the Lake of the Woods," the protagonist John Wade fabricates intricate story-truths for similar reasons; certain distressing events he has endured are deemed too distressing to have actually occurred. Consequently, in his mind, he obliterates them through selective memory.

Each of the three works under consideration delves into the concept of fiction, exploring the motivations behind storytelling, the origins of these narratives within the human psyche, and the profound significance of storytelling as a fundamental human activity. O'Brien's prowess shines through as he delves into these inquiries, skillfully examining the art of storytelling while simultaneously weaving narratives that delve into this very process.

### **1.3.1 The Things They Carried as metafictional writing**

The epigraph in *The Things They Carried* features a quote from John Ransom's *Andersonville Diary*, highlighting the distinctiveness of the book compared to other works about the war and its events, "This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the Tate war' or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest [43]". The book's title page clearly designates it as a work of fiction, but it is dedicated to the primary characters of the novel. The epigraph serves to reaffirm that while civilians may find it challenging to comprehend the blend of fiction and reality depicted in the book, fellow soldiers are more likely to grasp its essence as Philip Beidler has pointed out in one of his studies of the literature of that conflict that "most of the time in Vietnam, there were some things that seemed just too terrible and strange to be true and others that were just too terrible and true to be strange [4]". This assurance implies a certain level of defense, yet it immediately prompts

contemplation about the nature of truth and, subsequently, the inherent divide in communication between civilians and soldiers. These concepts serve as crucial touchstones for comprehending the essence of the book. Additionally, an intriguing and somewhat enigmatic disclaimer on the publisher's imprint page emphasizes that the work is indeed a product of fiction, with the exception of a few details related to the author's own life. This notion of "except for a few details regarding the author's own life" leaves room for interpretation, encompassing a wide range of possibilities.

*The Things They Carried* predominantly employs a first-person narrative, with the narrator being a foot soldier named Tim O'Brien. As was mentioned before as the story unfolds, readers discover that this fictional Tim O'Brien shares certain commonalities with the real-life author, such as their shared hometown of Worthington, Minnesota, the authorship of books titled "Going After Cacciato" and "If I Die in a Combat Zone," and their attendance at graduate school at Harvard. The narrative prompts readers to question what elements are genuine, what are products of fiction, and what constitutes the ultimate truth.

O'Brien's response to these inquiries would likely be that the distinction between reality and fiction is secondary. The true essence of the narrative lies not in resolving these questions but in raising them in the first place. O'Brien implies that the potency of good fiction resides in evoking these questions rather than providing clear-cut answers. Effective narratives are those that keep readers engaged, inviting them to ponder and speculate. This is what maintains the allure of storytelling. As O'Brien aptly articulates, "Above all, writing fiction involves a desire to enter the mystery of things: that human craving to know what cannot be known [39]". While storytelling possesses the enchanting capacity to unveil the inscrutable, a story that uncovers every mystery might quash the very fascination that O'Brien speaks of. Such a narrative would strip away the sense of reality and necessity, rendering it unengaging.

According to Tobey C. Herzog, O'Brien's practice of initially presenting a supposedly factual account or detail later contradicted by his admission of its fictional nature effectively acquaints listeners with the intricate interplay of facts, history, fiction, truth, lies, memory, and imagination underpinning his entire body of work [25]. In the context of a war where language itself faltered in effectively conveying the horrors of combat, a purely 'factual' representation might appear insufficient. Thus arises the necessity for the amalgamation of fact, fiction, and metafiction, a requirement that elucidates O'Brien's emphasis on the significance of storytelling in his writings and interviews.

In "Spin" O'Brien articulates, "Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story [40]". Likewise, in "Good Form" he reflects, "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present [40]". In "The Lives of the Dead" he expresses, "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 [40]". In an interview, O'Brien emphasizes, "I'm a believer in the power of stories, whether they're true, embellished, and exaggerated, or utterly made up. A good story has a power that transcends the question of factuality or actuality [7]". Stories serve as a means of reclaiming the past and are regarded as redemptive, as illustrated by the boy Timmy's revival of Linda, which consequently rescues the life of the narrator Tim O'Brien. There exists a profound faith in the potency of the spoken word, the art of storytelling, which imbues the narrative with significance.

Steven Kaplan notes that "The Things" reflects O'Brien's adoration of storytelling as an endeavor capable of extracting bearable and meaningful truths from even the most harrowing events [31]. Whether recounting the reality of combat and death in Vietnam or the loss of Linda, narrative emerges as a means of retelling and, in turn, healing. Much of the literature by Vietnam veterans is born out of and perhaps serves a therapeutic function, and while one may question the

efficacy of writing as psychological catharsis, the notion of stories as regenerative finds acceptance [22].

The mode of representation in O'Brien's work does not merely mirror reality but engages in a "game," as noted by Iser in "The Play of the Text," a process that involves enacting the events: "Since the text is fictional, it automatically invokes a convention-governed contract between author and reader, indicating that the textual world is to be viewed not as reality but as if it were reality [55]". Consequently, whatever unfolds within the text is not meant to represent the world directly but to enact a fabricated reality, replicating identifiable elements of reality but freeing itself from the consequences inherent in the real world.

This form of representation encompasses the staging of hypothetical occurrences in Vietnam, simultaneously prompting a critical examination of the reliability and authenticity of the narrative itself. Readers are consciously drawn into a participatory act, a "performative act," compelling them to grapple with the daunting task of comprehending events that defy easy understanding. The reader is directly exposed to the pervasive uncertainty that characterized the experience of being in Vietnam, confronted with the imperative to believe that the only certainty was the overwhelming ambiguity.

This immersive process is most evident in a chapter aptly titled "How to tell a true war story." O'Brien initiates the chapter with the assertion "THIS IS TRUE," subsequently presenting a series of iterations of the narrative concerning the explosive demise of Kurt Lemon. However, the only certainty within these renditions is the continuous construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the tale right before the reader's eyes. The audience is presented with six different renditions of Kurt Lemon's death, each so disconcerting that it becomes challenging to articulate a more accurate depiction of his senseless demise than a resigned there it is. As O'Brien poignantly puts it, "in the end, really there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh' [40]".



However, a complication arises when narrative is regarded purely as a performative act, an endless game with multiple possibilities. The emphasis on ambiguity and uncertainty within Vietnam War narratives reflects a certain aspect of the reality of combat. In "Ghost Soldiers" O'Brien conveys a sense of a haunted terrain where the Americans were intruders, describing it as "ghost country" where the elusive figure of the enemy, VietCong appeared and vanished, almost magically merging with the surroundings, taking on different forms, and possessing almost supernatural abilities. Yet, reading accounts and stories from the perspective of VietCong unveils the absence of anything 'magical' in his existence. The stereotypical representation of the enemy contributes to a portrayal of Vietnam as a phantasmagoric game, where facts become elusive.

While O'Brien acknowledges certain aspects of this harsh reality in the vivid, multifaceted depictions of the deaths of Curt Lemon and Kiowa, he simultaneously asserts the value of storytelling as a means of alleviating the horrors of Vietnam. In the process of narrating these horrors, he constructs an overarching mythical framework centered on themes of love, camaraderie, and collective amnesia: "You become part of a tribe and you share the same blood – you give it together, you take it together [40]".

Nevertheless, O'Brien reiterates the overwhelming power of storytelling in an interview, envisioning a future where the experience of Vietnam, stripped of its factual details, would be preserved solely through the perpetuation of stories [32]. This forecasted disappearance of facts, predicted to occur over centuries, has already begun to materialize. The Vietnam War has been extensively revised in American politics, popular culture, and collective imagination. O'Brien's narratives may possess greater integrity and truth compared to those emanating from Hollywood or Washington; however, the prioritization of stories, as stories, risks contributing to the further dehistoricization of the Vietnam conflict. Viewing Vietnam primarily or predominantly through the lenses of ambiguity, mystery, and

an endless proliferation of narratives runs the risk of succumbing to a typical postmodernist pitfall.

The postmodern emphasis on emotions in *The Things They Carried* foreshadows the complete rejection of reality and objectivity witnessed in 2020. Following the upheaval of Vietnam, the advent of video news, and widespread financial uncertainty, the American public began to lose faith in the notion of objective truth. Presenting truth as an unwavering, immutable value came across as naive and short-sighted. As a ground zero for understanding subjectivity, O'Brien's work anticipated the rise of fictitious truth and played a significant role in popularizing it. The American public now finds the concepts of truth and facts less convincing [57].

Devoid of metafiction, *The Things They Carried* would lose its distinctive essence. While readers might still apprehend the emotional and traumatic facets of the war, Tim O'Brien's interaction with his audience propels their empathy to a heightened level, infusing a wholly distinct dimension of understanding. In a conventional novel, one might feel like a detached observer. Although the narrative can evoke emotions, there remains a palpable distance between reader and author, fortified by the constraints of space and time. While breaking the fourth wall doesn't literally bridge that gap, it renders the words more intimate. Instead of addressing an anonymous, faceless entity, O'Brien's narrative feels like a direct conversation with the reader. Storytelling, in any form, is an art, but experiencing a story firsthand, in person, is an entirely different encounter. Metafiction, to the greatest extent possible, enables authors to emulate the immediacy of oral narratives. Tim O'Brien adeptly exploits this, enriching his novel [13].

The exploration of the concept of "story truth" underscores the novel's emphasis on emotions over specific events. On the surface, *The Things They Carried* portrays the Vietnam War – soldiers' actions, choices, and losses. Yet, at its core, the novel delves into the psychological toll of war, eclipsing the physical aspect. O'Brien and his comrades were unable to fully reintegrate into a world

beyond war; their experiences altered their perception of their surroundings and the people around them, a facet arguably more significant than the physical injuries sustained in Vietnam. Tim O'Brien strategically employs metafiction to reinforce this notion, aligning it with major themes and character development. He demonstrates how intricately the narrative hinges on complex emotions and highlights the impact if he hadn't assigned them such paramount importance. The chapter "Notes" serves as a quintessential example of metafiction – O'Brien, directly addressing the readers, writes about the process of creating the story they read just pages before. Moreover, he reflects on previous (unsuccessful) attempts at narrating the same story. O'Brien's reluctance to confront these events head-on led him to omit them, resulting in a compromised story [28]. Without the emotions, even the central figure in the narrative felt disconnected. A comprehension of the protagonist's mental state during the actual events significantly amplifies the sympathy and empathy elicited from readers, elucidating why the narrative is worth exploring. Tim O'Brien's prowess as a storyteller is indisputable. O'Brien's skillful use of metafiction, marked by insightful commentary, deliberate miscommunication, and narrative manipulation, is the cornerstone of the novel's uniqueness. It serves a multifaceted purpose, enriching readers' understanding of characters, exploring central themes, and underscoring the undeniable significance of humanity in literature.

## **Conclusions to Chapter One**

The exploration of war literature from the Lost Generation to the era of metafiction provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving narrative strategies employed to capture the essence of conflict. The Lost Generation, grappling with the aftermath of World War I, laid the groundwork for depicting the disillusionment, trauma, and existential crises that accompany war. Moving forward, subsequent generations of writers continued to redefine the conventions of war literature, incorporating new perspectives, and experimenting with narrative forms.

The exploration of the concepts of trauma and memory within this chapter has unraveled a complex tapestry that intertwines the psychological dimensions of human experience. As we delved into the intricate interrelation between trauma and memory, it became evident that these two elements are inextricably linked, shaping and reshaping one another in a dynamic dance that influences the individual's perception of self and the world.

This chapter has illuminated the reciprocal impact between trauma and memory, emphasizing the bidirectional relationship wherein trauma influences memory processes, and in turn, the nature of memory can shape the experience and manifestation of trauma. The intricate interplay between these constructs underscores the importance of considering both trauma and memory as dynamic and evolving entities within the broader framework of psychological well-being. As we navigate the complex terrain of trauma, it is crucial to appreciate its evolution not only as a diagnostic category but as a reflection of our evolving understanding of human resilience and vulnerability. The insights gained from this chapter contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of trauma, paving the way for empathetic and culturally sensitive interventions that acknowledge the diverse manifestations and expressions of psychological distress. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of trauma and memory, we pave the way for a more

comprehensive and empathetic approach to understanding and addressing the complexities of the human psyche in the face of adversity.

The emergence of metafiction marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of war literature and trauma depiction, challenging traditional storytelling methods. The significance of metafiction can be hardly overestimated, it challenges traditional storytelling conventions and invites readers to engage more actively with the text. It raises questions about the nature of truth, fiction, and reality, ultimately highlighting the subjectivity of perception and interpretation. By drawing attention to its own artificiality, metafiction encourages critical thinking about the act of storytelling and its role in shaping our understanding of the world.

With metafiction, authors like Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* transcend the boundaries of conventional war narratives. O'Brien's use of metafiction becomes a powerful tool for conveying the intricacies of war experiences.

Hallmark of Tim O'Brien's metafictional style is his adept use of the interplay between fact and fiction. In his Vietnam War stories, he weaves real historical events and details into the narrative alongside fictional elements and characters. This fusion of historical accuracy and imaginative storytelling blurs the line between reality and fiction, compelling readers to consider the constructed nature of the narrative.

O'Brien openly admits to fictionalizing events and characters in his works, declaring at the beginning that this is a work of fiction, thus highlighting the malleability of historical truth and the subjectivity of memory. By doing so, he prompts readers to question the authenticity of the narrative while emphasizing the emotional and psychological truths that stories can convey. O'Brien actively involves readers in the deconstruction of the narrative by prompting them to think critically about the stories they are consuming. He challenges readers to consider their own role in interpreting and constructing meaning from the text.

Through various metafictional devices, such as the author-narrator duality and the blurring of fact and fiction, O'Brien encourages readers to question the reliability of the narrative and to participate actively in the process of meaning-making. This reader engagement is a defining feature of his metafictional approach.

## **CHAPTER 2. WAR DISCOURSE IN O'BRIEN'S NOVEL THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**

### **2.1. The verbalization of the traumatic experience in the novel**

#### **2.1.1 Moral ambiguity in the context of war narration**

The civilian moral framework operates on clear-cut, binary standards dictating acceptable behavior, condemning aggressive acts like assault and murder, and imposing penalties such as fines, imprisonment, or even the death penalty. However, when a soldier's duty encompasses inherently immoral actions, the conventional moral code loses relevance. In this context, taking the lives of fellow human beings is deemed morally justifiable, but only if those individuals are perceived as enemies.

The soldiers' understanding of ethics undergoes a shift due to the inherently unethical nature of their duty. Consequently, they must construct a new moral system that incorporates violence as an honorable means to fulfill their responsibilities. In contrast to civilian life where pleasure typically rewards good behavior or aligns with moral living, wartime pleasure becomes an emotional response linked to perceived benefits such as enhanced safety and control. Through the soldiers' formulation of this new moral system and the consequent association of pleasure with violence, morality is redefined as the least harmful method of conflict resolution. In the battlefield, violence becomes the chosen means of resolving conflicts within the parameters of their redefined morality [37].

The nuanced conflict between home morality and wartime morality is the biggest issue. Cheyney Ryan highlights the most significant clash between civilian and military ethics, asserting that soldiers are not deemed wrong even if their cause is unjust, exemplifying the ethical leniency granted to military personnel [46]. While ethical analyses have scrutinized "the resort to war" and "the conduct of war," the adoption of a new moral code on the battlefield, has been overlooked [36]. In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the concept of morality undergoes complexity due to the treatment of violence. Consequently, morality in the context

of the novel must be conceptualized on a spectrum rather than adhering to a binary scale.

While the battlefield necessitates an adapted moral system, blanket condemnation of all violence poses a significant obstacle to reconciling military and civilian perspectives on morality. On the home front, an increasing number of individuals began questioning the moral integrity of military service, sparking inquiries into the ethicality of the killing inherent in such service. This questioning puts into doubt whether military personnel should receive the "ethical pardon" as articulated by Ryan [46]. To reconcile their military duty with the growing anti-military sentiments at home, Vietnam War soldiers find themselves compelled to construct a new moral code independent of the established military ethics from previous wars. In prior conflicts, wartime violence received acceptance from the civilian public, and soldiers could rely on the "ethical pardon" granted during times of conflict [46]. However, the public's condemnation of all violence during the Vietnam War forces soldiers to devise a system to justify the violence inherent in war.

Despite the conflict with the moral principles ingrained in their youth, soldiers are compelled to kill regardless of their inclinations, challenging their pre-enlistment moral foundations.

"I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty...The grenade was to make him go away, just evaporate, and I leaned back and felt my head go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it [40]". In laying the groundwork for his narrative, O'Brien candidly admits to having misled his daughter, Kathleen, about a pivotal event in Vietnam involving the killing of a man. The story becomes a platform for O'Brien to share the "adult" version, delving into the nuances of what transpired. As he recounts the act of taking another person's life, he emphasizes the rapidity of the event. Unlike a contemplative process influenced by political or social considerations, the decision



to throw the grenade lacked a prolonged thought process. Crucially, O'Brien harbored no animosity towards his target; the reaction was a nearly instinctive response.

The narrative underscores O'Brien's profound discomfort with the irrevocable nature of death resulting from a spontaneous action. Despite the absence of moral or explicit justifications for the grenade throw – aside from the impulse to make the man vanish – O'Brien meticulously enumerates the aspects he did not contemplate regarding the individual in question. This introspective exploration reveals the complexity of moral reckoning in the context of war, where actions are propelled by reflex rather than reasoned deliberation, leaving O'Brien grappling with the aftermath of a life-altering decision.

Morality in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, influencing the characters' decisions, actions, and reflections on the Vietnam War. The novel explores moral dilemmas, the psychological burdens of war, and the complex interplay between personal ethics and the demands of the wartime environment. The characters in the novel grapple with profound moral decisions, often in situations where the traditional boundaries between right and wrong become blurred. Whether it's the decision to participate in the war, the killing of enemies, or the choices made in the heat of battle, O'Brien presents a landscape where conventional moral norms are challenged. The burden of these moral choices becomes an additional weight carried by the soldiers.

In *The Things They Carried*, the characters engage in a multitude of storytelling, prompting the recurrent question, "What's the moral?" One such story, narrated by Mitchell Sanders in "How to Tell a True War Story," recounts a company's haunting experience in the darkness over a village, plagued by auditory hallucinations of joyous sounds. Unable to endure the illusion any longer, they call in an airstrike, reducing the city to scorched earth. Despite the destruction, the lingering sounds persist, leaving Sanders to search for a moral, met only with a perfunctory "Oh" from O'Brien. "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' [40]". In O'Brien's perspective, extracting a moral lesson from a war story is likened to attempt of unravel a thread from a woven cloth. He contends that the entire narrative is intricately interwoven, much like a fabric is dependent on each thread for its existence. Just as the cloth loses its completeness without a single thread, a war story loses its essence without considering the totality of its components – the unity of its parts is what constitutes the whole story. While readers may find smaller moral takeaways understandable, O'Brien argues that labeling actions within a war story as inherently moral or immoral necessitates the specific context of that particular narrative. The isolated action itself lacks a definitive moral classification, and O'Brien emphasizes the importance of the narrative context for a comprehensive understanding of its moral implications.

It's noteworthy that this nuanced stance deviates from O'Brien's initial assertion in the story, where he claimed that war stories inherently lack any ascertainable morals. In amending this stance within the same narrative, O'Brien adheres to the idea that war stories defy strict rules. The apparent contradiction in his assertions underscores the inherent complexity of war narratives, emphasizing that the unpredictable nature of war defies rigid adherence to consistent moral principles. In essence, within the realm of war stories, O'Brien suggests that the absence of clear-cut rules is a fundamental characteristic, making the contradiction a testament to the unpredictable and morally ambiguous nature of war storytelling.

“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. There is no rectitude whatsoever. 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 [40]”. O'Brien challenges the conventional norms of storytelling within the realm of war narratives, asserting that they operate outside the confines of fixed moral and factual truths. He presents a unique metric for assessing the authenticity of war stories, cautioning against interpreting them as conduits for moral justice or prescriptive lessons on human behavior. According to O'Brien, if a war story imparts a sense of moral righteousness or imparts a didactic lesson, it has veered into the realm of deception. His skepticism toward the portrayal of virtue suggests a refusal to romanticize or sanitize the harsh realities of war. O'Brien characterizes the belief in the moral upliftment of war stories as a "very old and terrible lie." This phrase underscores his conviction that seeking moral redemption or virtue in war narratives perpetuates a falsehood. War, in its unvarnished truth, is bereft of rectitude, and any attempt to find it is illusory.

Authentic war stories, in O'Brien's view, are characterized by an unwavering commitment to exploring the depths of obscenity and evil inherent in human behavior. War, as he picture it, compels individuals to embrace their most primal instincts for survival, discarding civilized moral frameworks. In the desperate struggle for life during wartime, conventional notions of morality become obsolete, leading to actions that defy ethical norms. The narratives emerging from war zones, therefore, resist serving as vessels for illustrating fundamental human goodness or offering overarching lessons on how to live. Such an approach, O'Brien contends, would misrepresent the nature of war itself, where inherent truths or inherent goodness are elusive, if not entirely absent. This perspective underscores O'Brien's belief that war stories should not conform to the traditional expectations of storytelling, which often seek to derive meaning, morality, or universal lessons from the narrative. Instead, he asserts that war stories must grapple with the harsh realities of wartime experiences, confronting the

unvarnished and often incomprehensible aspects of human behavior in the crucible of conflict.

### **2.1.2. The image of death and its dimensions**

When faced with the task of depicting a profoundly dramatic scene that encapsulates the essence of "war", O'Brien opts for simplicity, choosing sentences that are as plain and clear as possible: "His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole [40]. O'Brien's unflinching gaze remains fixed on the young man he has killed, vividly illustrating each gruesome detail of the lifeless body, akin to the changing slides of an antiquated projector. In this relentless portrayal, a moving picture of Death unfolds.

Various authors employ compelling styles when tackling the subject of death, driven by the shared fascination and dread that both writers and readers experience. Natural death often culminates in a brief yet violent struggle, a final attempt by the living to cling to what is, in the words of a character from *The Things They Carried*, "overdue [40]". For Virginia Woolf, the demise of a moth represents a "minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist," defining death as an impending, powerful, and inevitable doom [56]. Mark Twain, conversely, views the death of his daughter Jean as "the most precious of all gifts" and a long-awaited reward after a lifetime of obligatory pain and torment [52]. Despite these disparate representations, they share the commonality of ascribing death a name, an identity, and an independent existence.

O'Brien, however, characterizes death in war as "a matter of luck and happenstance" that "transform bodies into piles of waste [40]". In his interpretation, death becomes a tangible and organic facet of nature, starkly real in its meaninglessness and randomness. Whether it's Curt Lemon stepping on a bomb while playing catch, Kiowa sinking into a "shit field" in the middle of the night, or Ted Lavender getting shot in the head during a bathroom break, O'Brien presents death caused by guns, bombs, mud, and internal torment. The dying are deprived

of the right to make that final struggle for life, a right even a moth possesses. In O'Brien's narrative, deaths are matter-of-factly piled on top of each other, resembling the bodies in a mass grave. What may be complicated and enigmatic in Woolf's England or Twain's America is shown as plain and simple in the context of Vietnam.

Despite this stark depiction of death, O'Brien does not entirely dismiss the idea. While many writers emphasize the contrast between life and death, with death seen as the opposite and the end of life, O'Brien's exploration of death in war adds a layer of complexity and enigma to this existential theme. O'Brien appears to acknowledge the traditional opposition surrounding the concept of death, yet his primary interpretation of what we commonly understand as death leans towards a more abstract and almost romantic perspective: "Twenty years later, I can still see the sunlight on Lemon's face. I can see him turning, looking back at Rat Kiley, then he laughed and took that curious half step from shade into sunlight, his face suddenly brown and shining, and when his foot touched down, in that instant, he must've thought it was the sunlight that was killing him. It was not the sunlight. It was a rigged 105 round. But if I could ever get the story right, how the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree [40]".

He imbues these moments with a mysterious and holy value, deviating from the typical interpretation of death. For instance, in the scene involving Curt Lemon, the focus shifts beyond his death. O'Brien sees it as a moment about sunlight, portraying light as if inhaling and embracing a boy who coincidentally loses his life in the process. The "final truth" in Lemon's flight is mirrored in another death scene, where O'Brien, alongside providing stiff and stark descriptions of a young Vietnamese man he killed, contemplates the entire life of the deceased. Due to the man's death, "his life was now a constellation of possibilities". While conventional thinking often merges the end of life with the moment of death, viewing them as a singular circumstance, O'Brien intentionally dissociates the two elements.

In "The Man I Killed," O'Brien's fixation on the corpse disturbs Kiowa more than any other soldier. Kiowa, acting as a self-appointed guardian, attempts to rouse O'Brien from his trance, urging him to stop staring. While the rest of O'Brien's platoon reacts to the deceased in ways that might be considered shockingly disrespectful by civilians - kicking, thumb-severing, high-fiving, and handshaking - Kiowa and his comrades do not turn away from death. Instead, they turn away from their individual interpretations of it, dissociating death from the dangers of sadness, trauma, or rage. In their eyes, death is separated from the lifeless bodies before them.

However, the moment they do so, all other understandings of the deceased person cease to exist; their sense of humor produces the same effects as our own interpretations. We, like the soldiers who turn away, and they, ignore what the moment of death offers, viewing it solely as the negation of life. In contrast, O'Brien stares at the body and envisions its past, breathing life into the lifeless existence. He sees in death not the antithesis of life but an expansion of our understanding of it, "Once you're alive, you can't ever be dead [40]".

This response may appear to be a soldier's defensive coping mechanism with the repetition of such a shocking event. Yet, O'Brien is revealing more: our impulse to stop at the simplest interpretation of a concept like death prevents us from seeing its greater significance, even from seeing the thing itself. When telling the story of Curt's death to a crowd of civilians, an elderly woman advises him to put all war memories behind him and "find new stories to tell." O'Brien thinks, "You dumb cooze... she wasn't listening. It wasn't a war story. It was a love story [40]". When civilians listen to the story, all they hear is "death" and "war is bad"; they don't see the elements of truth, flight, and sunlight – the parts that have a right not to be overshadowed by our fear of death, but always are.

O'Brien explores other abstract concepts – love, loyalty, guilt, fear, superstition – in his stories, packed with the essence of Vietnam. In one story within a story, O'Brien becomes part of the audience listening to Rat Kiley speak

about Mary Anne, a strong, young, innocent American girl who joins her sweetheart soldier in Vietnam. To the soldier's horror, Mary Anne discovers her true identity lies within the deep and animalistic wilderness of Vietnam. This story speaks to both author and reader, presenting the war not as a land of dread where all is lost in confusion, death, and meaninglessness, but as a place of unexpected enlightenment and acceptance. "When I'm out there at night," says Mary Anne, "I feel close to my own body... I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else [40]". Our initial shock is gradually replaced by unexpected envy for this young girl in Vietnam; Mary Anne becomes the symbol of everything civilians lose in exchange for the numbing comfort of civilization. She represents us before our break from the self, if there ever was such a thing, and our definitions of concepts like enlightenment and love shift and expand.

But in fact there is no romanticizing, no love or sunlight, as O'Brien vividly recounts the feeling of being shot, "the stiff thump of the bullet, like a fist, the way it knocks the air out of you and makes you cough... the way your eyes focus on a tiny white pebble or a blade of grass and how you start thinking, Oh man, that's the last thing I'll ever see, that pebble, that blade of grass, which makes you want to cry [40]". Death, for that fleeting moment, becomes simply the end of life, dominating his mind with a literal interpretation, much like when he receives his draft notice at age twenty-one – a harbinger of impending doom. "I remember a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking, just a silent howl. A million things at once – I was too good for this war... Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard [40]". In this confession, the voice of a frightened child emerges, torn between the civilian's literal and reductive interpretation of his duty as a citizen and his own fear of Vietnam. His resentment for the incompetent medic echoes the grudge he harbors toward the ignorant members of his hometown who expect him to enter the war with manly pride.

Mary Anne's rebirth and the deaths of soldiers and civilians in Vietnam are, to some extent, constructed to convey what O'Brien claims is the genuine significance of those moments; he calls this the "story-truth" and contrasts it with the "happening-truth," the actual occurrence in its unaltered form. Similar to how a director edits films to convey a specific message, O'Brien crafts his narrative to help us redefine literal worldviews, allowing concepts like war and love to encompass contradiction, to see death as sunlight and randomness as well as the end of life. However, in his own moments of desperation, the matters of the world suddenly become clear and definite, and civilian literalism dominates.

Through these moments, O'Brien forcefully reminds us of the sheer senselessness of war. What we, as individuals, must never forget is the truest and rawest reality – a reality often obscured by political, social, and statistical interpretations.

The character of Tim O'Brien is initially introduced in the subsequent episode, titled "Love". Lieutenant Jimmy Cross pays him a visit years after the war's conclusion, and Cross is still carrying his love for Martha: "Nothing had changed. He still loved her [40]". Although many years have elapsed in the story, just a turn of the page in the book, whether the two episodes are read sequentially or not, yields an unaltered reality: Jimmy Cross's enduring love for Martha. Rereading the stories, the constancy prevails: Jimmy Cross continues to love Martha. Later in the book, O'Brien asserts, "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it [40]". Memories may fade, but stories endure; with every return to a story, nothing changes. The known facts persist, and the unknowns remain elusive. This is a significant aspect of much of O'Brien's fiction – offering the reader the flexibility to derive different resolutions with each reading. For instance, O'Brien concludes the "Love" episode with a captivating question mark. In the narrative, Tim O'Brien bids farewell to Jimmy Cross after his visit: "Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon



leader ever.’ He hesitated for a second. ‘And do me a favor. Don’t mention anything about...’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘I won’t.’ [40]”.

Jimmy Cross’s initial request, for character O’Brien to embellish him into something more than he was, exemplifies one of the author’s powers. Writers possess the ability to elevate their friends and themselves into something greater than reality. The storyteller holds all the cards. Much like Jimmy Cross’s earlier pretense in *The Things They Carried*, where he conceals the burdens he bears, feigns obliviousness to his responsibility for his men’s lives, and imagines a reality devoid of war, O’Brien illustrates that storytellers, too, can engage in the same act of make-believe: transforming Jimmy Cross into anything the author, character O’Brien, desires.

Jimmy Cross’s second, unfinished request introduces a delightful ambiguity. What is the undisclosed element that Jimmy Cross doesn’t want character Tim O’Brien to include in his story? Cross incinerated the pictures and letters from Martha due to guilt over Ted Lavender’s death, shot while Cross was daydreaming about Martha: “He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war [40]”. Is this shame the unmentionable aspect? Does character Tim O’Brien betray his fictional friend by revealing it, or does he respect his friend’s wish? Is the story character O’Brien narrates distinct from the one author O’Brien tells? Is there a concealed secret kept from the reader? If so, what could it be that the narrator is withholding? These questions, lacking definitive answers, showcase Tim O’Brien at his best: the mystique, the fascination, and the perpetual inquiry constitute the allure of his stories.

The subsequent episode is titled “Spin,” exploring moments when the war wasn’t overwhelmingly grim: “On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance [40]”. This encapsulates the essence of stories – their ability to embellish, to make things dance. Stories

can transform the unsightly into something beautiful, the beautiful into something heart-wrenching, and the heart-wrenching into something trivial. “The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. But the war wasn’t all that way [40]”. Stories share this quality: they exist in their own dimension, whether good or bad, replaying themselves incessantly. They are perpetual occurrences that never cease.

This episode introduces Tim O’Brien’s fictional nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, marking a significant divergence between the character Tim O’Brien and the author himself. Although author O’Brien and character O’Brien, as emphasized in the book’s disclaimer, should not be conflated, their differences reveal intriguing similarities. Character O’Brien grapples with the presence of a daughter, compelling him to reflect on his identity as a writer still immersed in narratives of the Vietnam War. Author O’Brien, in turn, bestows upon his alter ego a daughter, serving a comparable purpose for both O’Briens. Author O’Brien leverages a daughter as a form of conscience, endowing character O’Brien with a platform to scrutinize the motivations behind his writing.

Character O’Brien’s daughter, Kathleen, fervently believes her father should shift focus from war narratives to more uplifting subjects. However, O’Brien, with his understanding of memory’s impact on imagination, acknowledges the complexity of forgetting: “In a way, I guess, she’s right: I should forget it...All those stories [40]”.

This interplay between memory and imagination mirrors the thematic landscape of “Going After Cacciato,” where the character Paul Berlin resides. The Things They Carried further complicates this dynamic, as the character at the intersection of memory and dreams is named Tim O’Brien – a writer and an affable personality. The reader desires the fictional man and his wonderful daughter to be real, yearning to believe the tales being narrated without questioning their veracity. However, for author O’Brien, stories function differently: “The war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And

sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing left to remember but the story [40]”.

Stories don't aim to present indisputable facts or adhere strictly to anyone's version of reality. Narratives aren't a quest for universal truths; instead, they serve to objectify personal truths. O'Brien, in a conversation with Lowenthal, emphasizes that fiction involves the art of telling noble lies, sublime lies – a means of lying to convey deeper truths. Through the transformation of experience into narrative, intangible elements such as memory and imagination are crystallized into enduring accounts of what once was.

Author O'Brien has a penchant for raising fundamental questions early on, contributing to the complexity of his work by determining what to disclose to the reader and what to leave open for interpretation. In "Going After Cacciato," he provides ample details regarding the deaths of the men introduced in the novel's opening lines, yet deliberately leaves gaps for readers to puzzle out or continue contemplating. *The Things They Carried* follows a similar approach; it unveils certain pivotal details while leaving others unresolved, creating a narrative that leaves lingering questions.

"Spin" introduces one of the book's central unsolved mysteries: "A red clay trail. A hand grenade. A slim, dainty man of about twenty. Kiowa saying, 'No choice, Tim. What else could you do? Right? Talk to me' [40]”.

The question surrounding whether character Tim O'Brien killed a young enemy soldier remains a persistent ambiguity in the book. Given the characters' tendencies to exaggerate, contradict one another, and take credit for each other's stories, the fate of this particular young man – whether killed by character O'Brien, someone else, or not at all – never becomes definitively clear. Many stories in *The Things They Carried* involve retellings with variations, narrators disputing the accuracy of their own accounts, and characters modifying or seizing stories from

others. The narrative engages in a continuous dialogue about invention, making it challenging to extract straightforward facts.

This discourse on invention underscores Tim O'Brien's approach, where facts are just one dimension of a larger exploration. Life, as verbalized by O'Brien, encompasses more than mere facts; it incorporates possibilities, perceptions, and dreams that collectively contribute to shaping his narrative.

## **2.2. War discourse and identity construction in the novel**

### **2.2.1. Obligation and embarrassment on the Rainy River**

The "On the Rainy River" episode in the novel unfolds as character Tim O'Brien receives his draft notice, prompting him to escape his Minnesota hometown for the Rainy River, which marks the boundary between Minnesota and Canada. During his six days there, he shares contemplative moments with Elroy Berdahl at the Tip Top Lodge, grappling with the decision of whether to participate in the war or seek refuge.

The narrative commences with Character O'Brien adopting a confessional tone, unveiling a story never previously shared, expressing apprehension about potential embarrassment and the instinctive desire for a swift departure that typically accompanies confessions. The weight of this undisclosed tale has burdened him for over two decades, instigating feelings of shame that he has attempted to suppress. By committing the facts to paper, he seeks relief for the pressure on his dreams, acknowledging the inherent difficulty in recounting this particular narrative.

Despite the fictional nature of the story, there is an undeniable overlap between author O'Brien and character O'Brien, particularly in the opening confessional lines of "On the Rainy River." When Tim O'Brien, the narrator, declares that he has carried this story for two decades, it is both the character and the author, Tim O'Brien, speaking in unison.

In "On the Rainy River," Tim O'Brien grapples with the notion of running away from the war, facing a clash between intellect and emotion. Despite his conscience urging him to flee, an irrational and potent force pushes him toward the war, rooted in a sense of shame. The theme of wrestling with the courage to defy expectations recurs in O'Brien's works, as seen in Paul Berlin's reluctant participation in the war and admiration for Cacciato's straightforward departure. This theme extends to O'Brien's nonfiction, where he details elaborate plans to flee to Sweden, only to confront his own cowardice and ultimately go to war. The internal struggle reflects both character O'Brien's narrative and the real Tim O'Brien's experiences, acknowledging the enduring impact of fear, tradition, and the risk of rejection on the decision to face the war despite personal reservations. O'Brien's candid admission of his own cowardice in the face of societal expectations resonates throughout his literary and nonfiction explorations of the internal conflicts surrounding the Vietnam War.

Later in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien distinguishes between "story-truth" and "happening-truth," emphasizing the disparity between events within a narrative construct and those in real life. While there may be instances of overlap between the two, the reader is cautioned against conflating possibilities with facts or mistaking O'Brien for his characters. The essence of truth takes precedence over mere facts. While soldiers may prioritize means over ends, a proficient writer must attend to both. If the emotions of shame, cowardice, and guilt can be effectively conveyed in fiction as in reality, the distinction between story-truth and happening-truth becomes inconsequential. The reader is encouraged to contemplate the significance of whether the events occurred within the narrative's construct or in actual life. O'Brien's probing questions about the nature of reality and fiction, what is being read – whether it's the fictional text or "real life" – resonate as more crucial than providing definitive answers. As *The Things They Carried* is a work of fiction, the reader is prompted to acknowledge the importance of the truth

embedded within the logic of the narrative construct, recognizing its intrinsic value.

In the realm of fiction, where story-truth holds sway over happening-truth, the Rainy River becomes a potent symbol in O'Brien's work, laden with representations of division, dichotomy, and indecision – echoed in Paul Berlin's surname, a city divided. The Rainy River, in particular, assumes symbolic significance: "I headed straight west along the Rainy River, which separates Minnesota from Canada, and which for me separated one life from another [40]". It emerges as a symbol of the boundary that separates distinct possibilities. Crossing that line transforms the narrator into a courageous outcast who adhered to convictions; avoiding it renders him a coward thrust into war. On one side lies what transpired, on the other side, what could have unfolded. The facts reside on one bank, the possibilities on the opposite. The Minnesota side embodies memory, while the Canada side embodies imagination.

This symbolic line, traversed by author O'Brien across various works, finds its most poignant confrontation in fiction. Unlike real life – history, laden with facts – where O'Brien lacked a tangible river to contemplate his decision to go to war, the story's river effectively portrays this division. Even if the narrative offers no easier resolutions than real life did, it renders the conflicting emotions of thirty years ago immediate and palpable. It brings to life the division between fact and fiction, between what transpired and what might have transpired. This clear demarcation between story-truth and happening-truth mirrors observation post: a locus where memory halts, and imagination commences, a space to scrutinize the metamorphosis from what "was to what if?", the very source of stories.

O'Brien playfully offers insight into his narrative technique, almost explicitly revealing his approach in "On the Rainy River" and the broader context of *The Things They Carried*. Reflecting on the events of that summer, he muses, "I sometimes wonder if the events of that summer didn't happen in some other

dimension, a place where your life exists before you've lived it, and where it goes afterward [40]".

This passage maintains a delightful ambiguity, representing a convergence of the two Tim O'Briens, character and author. The author constructs events that indeed occurred, but in another dimension: the realm of his imagination. This space is where life exists before living it and where it goes afterward. The author observes these events from a distance, witnessing a character with the same name and face who shares similar feelings but not necessarily identical experiences – where truth is more profound than facts. Simultaneously, it compels the character, Tim O'Brien, to acknowledge that these events only unfolded in someone else's dreams. In essence, he narrates not what happened last summer but what might have occurred the next summer.

This represents the alternate dimension O'Brien alludes to – a realm not of last summer's events but of what transpired the following summer, exploring not just what was but what could have been, or perhaps should have been. While O'Brien had the option to use his stories to muster courage, defying expectations and avoiding war (as seen in his novel *The Nuclear Age's* protagonist), he deliberately aligns his story-truth somewhat with happening-truth: distinct means are employed in reality and fiction, yet the ends remain consistent. Both Tim O'Brien, the author, and Tim O'Brien, the character, ultimately find themselves in the throes of war.

As the narrative approaches its zenith, the character Tim O'Brien is afloat on the Rainy River, fishing just yards from Canada, bravery, and myriad possibilities. He contemplates leaping from the boat and swimming towards Canada, where "Chunks of my own history flashed by [40]". A torrent of images inundates O'Brien, including memories of "a nine-year-old girl named Linda who had died of a brain tumor back in the fifth grade" and "a slim young man I would one day kill with my hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village of My Khe [40]".

O'Brien's past and future converge, with memory and imagination flooding him as he bobs on a symbolic line, the Rainy River itself, between the two. However, in the end, "I couldn't endure the mockery...even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was. [40]"

In an alternate realm, events unfold divergently. Endings can vary or remain unchanged, yet the process may differ. This dimension provides an objective lens for personal experiences and emotions that are otherwise elusive. Stepping outside ourselves, we glimpse how others might perceive us. It furnishes symbols to delineate the gap between our actions and potential alternatives, offering a distinct boundary where reality offered only ambiguity.

This dimension serves as a line in the sand where real life presented mere puddles. It captures the essence of what occurred last summer and propels us into a realm of alternate possibilities for the following summer. Here, it picks up where facts conclude, extending into the realm of possibilities. Nestled at the crossroads of yesterday and today, at the juncture of remembered and imagined, it acts as the narrative fulcrum. It serves as the space where stories initiate the reconciliation of past and future.

### **2.2.2. Narration as salvation**

The final episode, concluding the book, opens with an unequivocal truth – one of the rare certainties in the entire collection: "But this too is true: stories can save us [40]". The narrative weaves between tales of the deceased witnessed in Vietnam and the poignant story of Linda, a nine-year-old girl who, in her young days, captivated the heart of Timmy O'Brien and tragically succumbed to a brain tumor.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien lends voice to some of the Vietnam dead, injecting life into their stories. After the shooting of Ted Lavender, the soldiers pose questions and supply answers, embodying the essence of what stories



can achieve: resurrecting the unliving. Whether these figures are deceased or merely figments of dreams, stories breathe vitality into their existence. "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream it along with you, and in this way, memory, imagination, and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is an illusion of aliveness [40]". This illusion, this fictive dream, becomes a pathway to salvation: "That's what a story does. The bodies are animated. You make the dead talk [40]".

The narrative unfolds Timmy's inaugural date with Linda, where they attend a movie titled "The Man Who Never Was," a fitting title for characters in both the story and the broader book – men who never truly existed. Yet, through the narrative, they spring to life.

The story intertwines dreams, fusing the past with the present. "Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. Human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer experiencing guilt and sorrow. And now, as a writer, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body – her life [40]".

Even at the age of nine, Timmy O'Brien understood the profound impact stories could wield. Upon learning of Linda's death, he recounts, "I concentrated. I willed her alive. It was a dream, I suppose, or a daydream, but I made it happen [40]". Years later in Vietnam, the mature Timmy and his comrades "had ways of making the dead seem not so dead... by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was... we kept the dead alive with stories [40]". Narrating stories sustains a semblance of life for the departed, and as O'Brien emphasizes, "stories were passed down like legends from old-timer to newcomer. Mostly, though, we had to make up our own. Often they were exaggerated. Or blatant lies, but it was a way of bringing body and soul back together, or a way of making new bodies for the souls to inhabit [40]".

In this context, the soul appears as ethereal remnants of a past or future existence within the mind; whether derived from memory or imagination, these remnants can be brought to life through language, provided a tangible structure: resurrecting those who have passed away or granting those who never existed the opportunity to live.

Tim O'Brien's exploration of the interplay between memory, imagination, and storytelling in *The Things They Carried* extends beyond the boundaries of traditional narrative. The act of inventing stories to resurrect the deceased, as exemplified in young Timmy's attempts to bring Linda alive in his dreams, becomes a form of self-hypnosis – a testament to the transformative power of storytelling.

Following Linda's demise, young Timmy "made up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive in my sleep. I invented my own dreams [40]". Storytelling encompasses the ability to influence one's own dreams: "It was a kind of self-hypnosis. Partly willpower, partly faith, which is how stories arrive [40]". The enchantment of resurrecting the deceased "is a precious secret, like a magic trick, where if I tried to explain it, or even talk about it, the thrill and mystery would be gone [40]". While O'Brien delves into the mystery and discusses the magic trick he performs, he accomplishes this without robbing his stories of that sense of mystery and wonder; these mysteries propel the stories forward, and exploring the mystery deepens it rather than diminishing its impact. The mysterious nature of this storytelling alchemy, where the boundary between reality and imagination blurs, is a theme O'Brien delicately navigates without unraveling the very magic he seeks to convey.

Tim O'Brien set out to prove young Timmy wrong, demonstrating that the workings of stories, their origins, and their manifold purposes are so profound and enigmatic that the more one scrutinizes the mechanism, the more facets become apparent. Employing his adept self-reflexive fiction style, O'Brien provides answers to some questions while posing even more: "In the spell of memory and

imagination, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes... I can see Kiowa, and sometimes I see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story [40]".

In dismantling the notion that the workings of stories can be fully understood, O'Brien embraces a self-reflexive fiction style that invites both revelation and mystery. The alternate dimension he creates, where memories and imagination blend seamlessly, offers a profound insight into the redemptive power of storytelling. The image of Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights becomes a metaphorical representation of the storyteller's ability to traverse time and rescue moments from the grip of oblivion.

O'Brien's narrative transcends the confines of mere entertainment or historical recollection; it becomes a tool for personal and collective salvation. In this alternate dimension, where stories can mold reality as we desire, we not only have the power to rescue those who existed and those who never did but also to redeem ourselves. Through these stories, we can preserve our past, envision our future, and intertwine them with our present reality. Stories render experiences eternal; they embody salvation. Beyond the point where history fades and memory dissipates, and when the future loses significance, the story endures.

## **Conclusions to Chapter Two**

In conclusion, our exploration of the depiction of war in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* has revealed a rich tapestry of themes, unveiling the intricate layers of human experience in the crucible of conflict. Our analysis has delved into the novel's treatment of moral ambiguity, death representation, PTSD, and the interpretation of memory, each facet contributing to a nuanced and profound understanding of war's impact on the human psyche.

The examination of moral ambiguity in the novel illuminates the challenging ethical terrain traversed by soldiers during the Vietnam War. O'Brien masterfully crafts scenarios that force readers to grapple with the blurred lines between right and wrong, shedding light on the moral complexities inherent in war. This moral nuance adds depth to the characters, making their struggles and decisions resonate with authenticity.

Representation of death emerges as a poignant theme, extending beyond the physical cessation of life. O'Brien skillfully navigates the emotional aftermath of loss, illustrating how death reverberates through the lives of both the deceased and the living. By intertwining the visceral and the emotional aspects of mortality, the author paints a vivid picture of the profound and lasting impact of war on the human experience.

The exploration of PTSD in *The Things They Carried* reveals the haunting specter of trauma that lingers long after the combat boots have been hung up. O'Brien's portrayal of the psychological toll of war is a stark reminder of the enduring scars borne by those who have experienced the horrors of battle. Through the characters, we witness the ongoing struggle to reconcile their wartime traumas with the semblance of normalcy in post-war society.

The novel's representation of memory adds another layer of complexity to the narrative. O'Brien employs a non-linear structure that mirrors the fragmented

nature of memory itself. By weaving between past and present, he captures the fluidity and subjectivity of recollections. This technique underscores the idea that the memories of war are not static; rather, they evolve and persist in the minds of the characters, shaping their identities long after the war has ended.

Moreover, our analysis has extended beyond these thematic elements to explore the different layers of narration employed by O'Brien. The novel's metafictional aspects, where the author blurs the line between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, contribute to the postmodern nature of *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien invites readers to question the reliability of narrative and challenges conventional notions of truth, reflecting the ambiguity inherent in war experiences.

It is possible to say that, *The Things They Carried* emerges not merely as a war novel but as a postmodern exploration of the human condition in the face of conflict. Through its intricate narrative layers and thematic depth, O'Brien's work transcends traditional storytelling, offering readers a compelling and thought-provoking meditation on the multifaceted impact of war on the individual and collective human psyche.

## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our comprehensive examination of the depiction of war in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* has not only unveiled the intricate layers of the human experience in the context of conflict but has also allowed us to situate O'Brien within the broader evolution of war literature. This exploration extends from the Lost Generation writers to the postmodern era, particularly characterized by metafiction, where O'Brien emerges as a prominent figure pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling.

Evolution of war literature, traced from the disillusionment and existential questioning of the Lost Generation to the postmodern era, reflects a shift in narrative approaches. O'Brien's work stands as a testament to this evolution, transcending the straightforward realism of his predecessors delving into the psychological and existential dimensions, capturing the complexities of human experience amid the chaos of conflict.

The theoretical background of Tim O'Brien's critics provides a valuable framework for our analysis. Drawing on O'Brien's own experiences in the Vietnam War, critics have explored his unique contribution to war literature, emphasizing the authenticity and emotional resonance of his narratives. O'Brien's engagement with the moral, ethical, and psychological facets of war aligns with contemporary literary criticism, offering readers a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective on the human condition in times of conflict.

Tim O'Brien's role as a metafictional writer is a key aspect of our exploration. By blending fact with fiction, reality with imagination, O'Brien challenges traditional notions of truth and reality in storytelling. This metafictional approach mirrors the fragmentation and subjectivity of war experiences, inviting readers to question the reliability of narrative and emphasizing the malleability of memory.

As we consider the broader context of his literary contributions, the convergence of theoretical insights and practical observations allows us to draw comprehensive conclusions regarding the unique and innovative nature of O'Brien's work. The practical part of our study has scrutinized O'Brien's narrative techniques, shedding light on how he skillfully embraces postmodern elements in his storytelling. The fragmentation of the narrative structure, with its non-linear chronology and blending of reality and fiction, stands out as a hallmark of postmodernism within *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien intentionally disrupts conventional storytelling, mimicking the fractured nature of memory and challenging traditional notions of linear narrative progression.

The metafictional elements in *The Things They Carried* extend beyond O'Brien's mere inclusion of himself as a character; they permeate the narrative at various levels. The act of storytelling becomes an integral part of the characters' war experience, as they grapple not only with the physical burdens they carry but also with the weight of constructing their own stories. O'Brien's self-awareness as an author injects a layer of reflexivity into the narrative, prompting readers to contemplate the act of storytelling itself as a means of coping with the trauma of war.

In navigating the terrain of war literature, O'Brien transcends conventional boundaries by weaving a narrative that defies linear chronology. The temporal disarray in *The Things They Carried* mirrors the fractured nature of memory and the disorienting effects of war. This departure from a traditional narrative structure aligns with postmodern tendencies, challenging readers to reconstruct the events and make sense of the fragmented pieces. O'Brien's deliberate disruption of the narrative flow underscores the elusiveness of a singular, objective truth in recounting war experiences.

The polyphonic nature of the narrative not only mirrors the cacophony of voices in a war-torn landscape but also serves as a commentary on the subjective nature of truth. Each perspective contributes to the construction of a collective

memory, highlighting the inherent unreliability of individual accounts. O'Brien's narrative strategy compels readers to grapple with the complexities of truth and fiction, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. This deliberate blurring serves not only as an artistic choice but also as a thematic exploration of the elusive nature of objective truth in the context of war.

*The Things They Carried* stands as a testament to the evolving landscape of war literature, reflecting the broader cultural shifts in how society engages with the narratives of conflict. O'Brien's metafictional approach extends beyond a mere stylistic choice; it becomes a tool for critiquing the societal constructs that shape our understanding of war. Through the intentional blurring of reality and fiction, O'Brien prompts readers to question not only the authenticity of individual stories but also the larger narratives perpetuated by society. In doing so, the novel transcends its role as a personal reflection on war and emerges as a nuanced exploration of the intricate relationship between storytelling, truth, and the societal perception of war.

O'Brien's manipulation of truth and memory in *The Things They Carried* extends beyond a simple narrative device; it serves as a deliberate engagement with postmodern themes. The malleability of truth within the novel is not a mere reflection of the characters' unreliability but an intentional exploration of the instability inherent in the act of remembering. O'Brien's characters grapple with the burden of constructing their own truths, revealing a narrative landscape where the distinction between reality and imagination is intentionally obscured, echoing the postmodern preoccupation with the multiplicity of truths.

The novel's thematic emphasis on the subjectivity of storytelling resonates with the postmodern inclination to deconstruct established norms. O'Brien's characters not only carry the physical weight of their burdens but also the weight of their own narratives. The act of storytelling becomes a survival mechanism, a way to navigate the chaos of war, and an acknowledgment of the subjective lens through which individuals perceive and recount their experiences. By



foregrounding the act of storytelling as a central theme, O'Brien challenges readers to confront the complexities of narrative construction and the ever-shifting boundaries between fact and fiction.

In our analysis, Tim O'Brien emerges as a postmodern virtuoso, skillfully navigating the intricate terrain of war literature. The deliberate deconstruction of traditional narrative structures in *The Things They Carried* reflects a conscious departure from established norms, mirroring the postmodern penchant for dismantling conventional forms of storytelling. O'Brien's intentional blurring of boundaries, be they between truth and fiction or author and character, further exemplifies his commitment to a postmodern aesthetic that encourages readers to question and actively engage with the narrative.

*The Things They Carried* not only captures the visceral and harrowing realities of war but also transcends the limitations of conventional war literature. O'Brien's innovative approach mirrors the broader cultural and literary shifts associated with the postmodern era. The novel becomes a microcosm of the evolving understanding of truth and narrative in a world where absolutes are elusive. Through its intricate tapestry of stories and the deliberate ambiguity in its portrayal of truth, O'Brien's work stands as a testament to the transformative power of literature in challenging and reshaping our perceptions of war and the human experience.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

Кваліфікаційна робота містить комплексний аналіз репрезентації дискурсу війни в основоположній праці американського письменника Тіма О'Браєна «Що вони несли з собою». У роботі досліджується, як автор зображає концепт війни та її наслідки, показавши її не просто як тло, а як центральну тему, глибоко вкорінену в оповідну тканину твору.

Дослідження включає контекстуалізацію роману в ширшому ландшафті військової літератури та з'ясовує елементи постмодерну, використані О'Браєном. У дослідженні також підкреслюється, що роман виходить за межі особистих роздумів письменника про війну; він служить мікрокосмом ширших суспільних і культурних зрушень у зображенні війни в літературі. Як метафікційний твір, він є прикладом постмодерністської чутливості, навмисно стираючи межі між реальністю та вигадкою, щоб відобразити неоднозначність і складність, притаманні самому досвіду війни.

Кваліфікаційна робота пропонує детальне дослідження дискурсу війни в творі Тіма О'Браєна, з акцентом на тому, як цей роман виходить за межі традиційної воєнної літератури, демонструючи постмодерні літературні прийоми та пропонуючи глибокі роздуми про багатогранну природу війни.

Магістерська робота складається зі вступу, двох розділів із висновками до кожного з них, загальних висновків, резюме українською та англійською мовами та списку використаних джерел, що містить 57 позицій.

У першому розділі під назвою «Література про війну: від витоків до сучасного виміру» проведено комплексний огляд актуальних теоретичних аспектів дослідження у діахронічному підході. Цей розділ заглиблюється в історичне тло військової літератури та роз'яснює її ключові поняття. Крім того, тут докладно розглядається використання Тімом О'Браєном методів метафікції та оповіді.

У другому розділі, «Дискурс війни у романі О'Брайена «Що вони несли з собою», фокус зміщується в бік ретельного аналізу творчості Тіма О'Брайена. Цей розділ присвячений аналізу нюансів і тонкощів роману О'Брайена «Що вони несли з собою».

**Ключові слова:** метафікція, наративні техніки, постмодерна література про війну, пам'ять, травма.

## SUMMARY

The master's thesis provides a comprehensive examination of the war discourse representation within O'Brien's seminal work *The things they carried*. This thesis explores how author navigates the complexities of war, representing it not merely as a backdrop but as a central theme deeply embedded in the narrative fabric.

The study includes contextualizing of the novel within the broader landscape of war literature and elucidates the postmodern elements employed by O'Brien. The thesis also underscores that "The Things They Carried" extends beyond writer's personal reflections on war; it serves as a microcosm of broader societal and cultural shifts in the representation of war in literature. As a metafictional work, it exemplifies the postmodern sensibility, intentionally blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction to mirror the ambiguity and complexity inherent in the experience of war itself.

Master's thesis provides a nuanced and insightful exploration of the war discourse in Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," shedding light on how the novel transcends conventional war literature, exemplifying postmodern literary techniques, and offering a profound reflection on the multifaceted nature of war and storytelling.

The master's thesis consists of an introduction, two chapters with conclusions to each of them, general conclusions, a summary in Ukrainian and English and a list of references.

In the first chapter, titled "War literature: from its origin to contemporary dimension" the research conducts a comprehensive review of theoretical aspects pertinent to the study. This chapter delves into the historical background of war literature and elucidates key concepts. Additionally, it provides a detailed examination of Tim O'Brien's utilization of metafiction and narrative techniques.

In the second chapter, " War discourse in O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*," the focus shifts towards a meticulous analysis of Tim O'Brien's work. This chapter is dedicated to dissecting the nuances and intricacies found within O'Brien's novel "The Things They Carried."

**Keywords:** metafiction, narrative techniques, postmodern war literature, memory, trauma.

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