

### **Uncertainty Exploited: Tim O'Brien's Unique Use of Truth**

In "How to Tell a True War Story" Tim O'Brien does not produce a concise step-by-step formula for telling true war stories. Instead, he focuses on the different kinds of truth and the nature of truth in war stories. O'Brien paints truth as an uncertain thing that plays an uncertain role. In her essay "O'Brien's How to Tell a True War Story," Rosemary King analyzes O'Brien's use of truth and argues that O'Brien uses truth this way to "untangle the relationship between fact and fiction" (King 182).

But King's analysis can be further developed. O'Brien writes "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself" (Reader 181). O'Brien uses the ambiguous nature of truth as a rhetorical device to prove this point. The insecurity he imparts about truth in war stories is a metaphor for the insecure, indefinable nature of men in war.

To grasp O'Brien's rhetorical use of truth in war stories, it is imperative to fully understand his view of the concept. Rosemary King provides a keen breakdown of O'Brien's views. She writes that he uses truth alternately "to mean either factually accurate, or something higher and nobler" (King 182). O'Brien asserts that the "higher and nobler" meaning is more important than the "happeningness." "Happeningness is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth," he writes (Reader 182).

This is where uncertainty comes in. First of all, O'Brien does not define exactly what constitutes this "higher and nobler" truth in war stories. All he does is share the fact that this "higher and nobler" truth is intangible, and then narrow it down with qualifying statements like "you can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end" (178) or "true war stories do not generalize" (179). The idea of truth is further complicated by the fact that O'Brien and fellow soldiers (the people who tell war stories) are often unable to distinguish "happeningness" from personal truth. He explains, "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen," (176). O'Brien clouds truth by not clearly defining "higher and nobler" truth, and by noting the confusion of "happeningness" with personal truth amongst the soldiers who tell war stories.

The metaphor becomes evident as O'Brien delves into the experience of being a soldier. Just like he does not completely describe the "higher and nobler" truth that makes a true war story, he does not clearly describe the nature of being in war. He again makes qualifying statements without putting a finger on the reality: "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true"(181). He elaborates that "war has the feel-the spiritual texture-of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent" (181).

He does not clarify on how to tell a true war story, because he is unable to clarify the experience of fighting in a war. The metaphor is confirmed in the final paragraph where O'Brien compares the true war story to the experience of soldiers. "In the end of course, a true war story is never about the war. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do" he writes (183).

O'Brien's use of truth as a metaphor is postmodern in nature. In postmodernism, truth is uncertain and flexible; it is pursued but not understood. So it follows that O'Brien's creative use of truth and uncertainty as rhetorical devices adds a new element to postmodern conversation. Instead of just searching for clarity, like Rosemary King who analyzes truth to isolate fact from fiction, perhaps it is worth dwelling on the uncertain space between fact and fiction, between reality and perception. This way truth becomes a rhetorical tool as well as a mysterious goal.

## Works Cited

King, Rosemary. "O'Brien's How To Tell A True War Story." *The Explicator*. 57.3 (Spring 1999): 182-185.

O'Brien, Tim. "How to Tell a True War Story." *English 213 Course Reader*. Winter 2006. 174-183.