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The Female Experience of War in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

A Thesis in English

by

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## I. Introduction

The characterization of American women in literature has, in many ways, paralleled the position of American women in society throughout history; until the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women were marginalized and silenced in both areas. In a largely male-dominated society, "[t]o be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all" (Rivkin and Ryan 766). Female characters have always existed in literature, of course, but in literature written by men, women have traditionally been limited to "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated" for them (812), as detailed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their history of women in Western literature, "The Madwoman in the Attic." Gilbert and Gubar believe that by characterizing women as one or the other of these extremes, authors marginalize and exclude women, creating constructs rather than fleshed-out, realistic characters:

[P]recisely because a woman is denied the autonomy – the subjectivity – that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture (whose emblem might well be the pen) but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing. (814)

In other words, "*She has no story of her own*" (815) and is instead used to tell the stories of other, traditionally male, characters.

The angel characterization of females can be traced back most distinctly to the Virgin Mary of Christianity, and this characterization reached its apex in the nineteenth century, when the stringent expectations of Victorian womanhood became the norm and "conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness;

reminding all women that they should be angelic" (Gilbert and Gubar 816). Many nineteenth century authors took this construct a step further, creating an "Angel of Death," a character who, "in the severity of her selflessness, as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life ... becomes not just a memento of otherness but actually a *memento mori*" by dying (Gilbert and Gubar 817). Gilbert and Gubar examine Beth March, one of the sisters portrayed by Louisa May Alcott in *Little Women*, as an example of this "aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty":

Whether she becomes an *objet d'art* or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self -of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her to both death and heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story ... is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of "contemplative purity" evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave. (817)

These "angel" characters become martyrs – and boring ones at that.

The other common characterization of women, the "monster," offers no more substance and much more damage to the traditional view of women. As Gilbert and Gubar note, "patriarchal texts have traditionally suggested that every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother" (819), and the stereotypically male traits of autonomy, aggression, and confidence have often been deemed by authors as "monstrous" in women. Even the independent central character of *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp, is described by her male creator, William Makepeace Thackeray, as a "siren" with a "monster's hideous tail," the opposite of "proper, agreeable, and decorous" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 820). This construct, the authors argue, has its origins in Lilith, Adam's first wife, who deigned to

consider herself his equal and was banished "to the edge of the Red Sea to reside with demons" (823). Gilbert and Gubar believe that "literary women" have been left with a "double bind" created by the female characterizations of "angel" and "monster": "[A] life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story" (824). This is certainly a dire prospect for female literary characterizations, one which modern women readers and writers have had to overcome – and, it may be said, continue to struggle with.

A historical analysis of women's place in American society illustrates why female literary characters have been so marginalized. Historian Linda K. Kerber analyzes the well-known "separate spheres" argument in her article "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." First recognized by social historian Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, the idea of "separate spheres" for men and women has permeated – and degraded – women's roles in American culture for centuries. Though historians and linguists often point to Tocqueville's use of the term as the earliest known, "surveys of the history of political thought have shown that the habit of contrasting the 'worlds' of men and women ... is older than western civilization" (Kerber 18). As Kerber notes,

[Tocqueville] had urged that the "circle of domestic life" be searched for the distinguishing characteristics of American women, and once we looked, the separation of spheres seemed everywhere underfoot, from crocheted pillows reading *Woman's Place Is in the Home* to justifications for the exclusion of women from higher education, to arguments against birth control and abortion. Women were said to live in a distinct

"world," engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands, and family dependents. (10)

History and literature have both been driven primarily by the stories of men, mainly because "one of our culture's presuppositions has been that men and women live in separate spheres" (Kerber 11), and the sphere of men is external and public.

The woman's sphere has traditionally been internal and private; the home was her "proper sphere," as Betty Friedan noted (qtd. in Kerber 11), and she was defined by the male forces around her. This reiterates Gilbert and Gubar's assertion, noted earlier, that "*She has no story of her own*" (815). In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist critics like Friedan began to recognize the injurious impact of the "separate spheres," and they challenged this notion. The separation of men and women "served the interests of the dominant classes. Separate spheres were due neither to cultural accident nor to biological determinism. They were social constructions, camouflaging social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared" (Kerber 14). Despite the great strides made by women in the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries, the "metaphor remains resonant," according to Kerber,

because it retains some superficial vitality. For all our vaunted modernity, for all that men's "spheres" and women's "spheres" now overlap, vast areas of our experience and our consciousness do not overlap. The boundaries may be fuzzier, but our private spaces and our public spaces are still in many important senses gendered. The reconstruction of gender relations, and of the spaces that men and women may claim, is one of the most compelling contemporary social tasks ... On a wider stage, the reconstruction of gender relations is related to major issues of power, for we live in a world in which authority has

traditionally validated itself by its distance from the feminine and from what is understood to be effeminate. (39)

Thus, the marginalization of women in all facets continues to prove difficult to overcome.

One of the spaces most often claimed by men, and therefore most difficult for women themselves to claim, is the military and warfare. As the twentieth century progressed, however, women began to take on greater roles in the American military during World Wars I and II, but were usually relegated to "women's work" such as nursing and administration. American military leaders recognized the willingness of women to take part and the benefits of using such a large and willing segment of the population, but they "were puzzled about exactly how to fit them into the organization" (De Pauw 225).

The political and cultural movements of the 1960s in the United States heralded great changes for women that were reflected in society and in literature. The Vietnam War in particular brought with it a new and changing role for women on the battlefield as they continued to struggle with stereotypes. By far, "[m]ost women sent to Vietnam served in the traditional women's role, as nurses" (De Pauw 268). De Pauw continues:

In that capacity they saw more death and pain close up than combat soldiers did, and they agonized over their inability to save the young men in their care. Improvements in medical technology and speedy evacuation saved grotesquely injured soldiers who earlier would have died on the field. These wounded now came under the care of young women fresh out of nursing school. Decades later, many nurse veterans still have nightmares about wounded men and corpses. Nurses suffered physically as well as emotionally; nine army nurses died in Vietnam. (268)

Although American women were kept out of the line of fire, a military policy that continues to be debated today, they, too, suffered the wounds of war. Both male soldiers and female nurses were sent to Vietnam while very young and inexperienced, and men and women alike returned from Vietnam suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders. Many American women served in Vietnam in roles outside of the military, as "American civilian women ... could go where regulations prohibited sending women in uniform" (De Pauw 268). Missionaries, humanitarian volunteers, and journalists were among the many women serving in Vietnam during the war, and according to De Pauw, 62 of the women in these non-military capacities were killed there.

Still, the American women in Vietnam sensed their limitations, noting that military brass treated women like "'delicate creatures'" who should be kept from combat -the essence of war – at all costs" (De Pauw 268-9). Great strides had certainly been made for women in war, but change had only accomplished so much by the time the Vietnam War came to its ambivalent end in the 1970s. The literature that followed had some important questions to consider, laid out by Rivkin and Ryan:

If all language carries worlds within it, assumptions and values that lie embedded in the simplest of utterances, then how can women take up such language, the language of patriarchy, and hope to use it to forge a better world for women? Or is language neutral, an indifferent instrument that can be wielded in any number of socially constructive ways? And what does it mean here to speak of "a better world for women"? ... Shouldn't women especially know what it means to need to speak and be denied a language with which to speak? Yet isn't to speak for "other" women ... to do what men have always done for women? How can language be given when it takes so much away? (769)

Modern portrayals of female characters certainly had – and continue to have – some uncharted ground to cover.

The literature of the Vietnam War thus provides critics with an interesting subset to examine in the context of the growing women's movement and the portrayal of female characters. War literature is traditionally notable for its marginalization of female characters – if they are present at all – and yet the Vietnam War occurred at a time of tremendous change for women in American society. Women were stepping into the center. The literature of Vietnam followed suit, but only to a certain degree. Men and women alike came back to the United States post-war with wounds, both physical and psychological, and stories to tell. Although much of the literature of Vietnam – including films – was produced by men and promoted "the mythos of the wounded [male] combatant as the victim-hero" (Acton 100), women who served wrote their stories, too, and attempted to create heroines alongside the heroes.

In her article "Dangerous Daughters: American Nurses and Gender Identity in World War One and Vietnam," Carol Acton recognizes the important writings of Vietnam War nurses Lynda Van Devanter and Winnie Smith, while still noting the gap between the male and female war experiences: "popular culture as well as most historical and critical writing on Vietnam still focuses on men as 'the great war-story tellers'" (Acton 87). Acton makes the link between the "cultural and literary exclusion" of women from the genre and the "official exclusion of women from the war zone as it is defined by the military" (88), but the stories of Van Devanter and Smith represent an important step for women in this subset of literature. The tension between the female experience of war and traditional female stereotypes resonates in Acton's piece:

[T]he woman's identity is necessarily defined – and fragmented – in the context of the male combatant she nurses ... [T]hese war narratives show women who, for the most

part, accepted the gendered identities that were prescribed for them by their place in time and space, whether pre-World War One or 1950s and 60s North America. It was not until their war experience fragmented these identities that they came to perceive themselves as marginalized. Thus their perception of marginalization arises out of their traumatic war experience as nurses, rather than because they are women *per se*. Even if they defied some prescribed gender norms by going to war, they did so in a role that was quintessentially female: the nurse. (89)

Thus, women progress and regress at once. Though they are included in the experience of war, they are allowed in only as long as they play stereotypical roles and define themselves in men's terms.

In both the Vietnam War itself and the writings that followed, women were placed in Gilbert and Gubar's traditional literary roles of "angel" or "monster." In an attempt to address the "moral unease surrounding the intimate relationship necessary between the nurse and the wounded combatant" (Acton 91), Van Devanter, herself a nurse, notes that women in Vietnam, "if thought of at all, were usually thought of as saints or sinners" (qtd. in Acton 91-92): as maternal caretakers of or sexual recreation for male soldiers. However, Van Devanter, Smith, and other female Vietnam autobiographers paved new ground in attempting to equate the female experience of war with the male. Like male veteran writers, Van Devanter and Smith chronicle difficult post-war transitions, in which, "rather than a return to the safety of family and their pre-war identities, both [women] experience a profound dislocation upon their return home" (Acton 104). Families and friends treat the nurses' desires to share their Vietnam stories with shock and disdain, providing the women with no outlet to manage their transition from the horrific world of combat to the sheltered world of 1960s and 70s America. These circumstances parallel those of

male Vietnam combat vets, shared in works like Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, published in 1976. Still, women who served in Vietnam and struggled post-war were "initially refused entry into the Veterans associations that acted as support systems for male Vietnam veterans" (Acton 105). Despite having stories to tell, women who served in Vietnam struggled to find an audience. And female characters portrayed by male writers of war literature struggled to find a spotlight.

Susan Farrell points out in her article "Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of *The Things They Carried*," that as recently as 2003, feminist scholars argued "that much Vietnam War literature replicates traditional western notions of gender and thus reinforces patriarchal institutions and beliefs" (1). In literary chronicles of war through the twentieth century, female characters rarely exist at all except in peripheral roles, exempt from war's violence and politics and therefore ignorant of war's true experiences and consequences. This misogyny left women out of the war experience in classic works of literature such as Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, published in 1895, and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*; published in 1929. The key term in Farrell's assertion, however, is "much" – not all. A few Vietnam War veteran authors recognized the changing role of women, and expanded upon that change in their works. These male authors, along with the female Vietnam writers, exemplify the modernization of female characters in American literature: "despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts have been possible" for women (Gilbert and Gubar 824). One Vietnam War author who challenges the traditional misogyny of war texts and presents layered, dynamic female characters is Tim O'Brien.

In 1990, American author and Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien published his testimony of the experience, *The Things They Carried*, a short story collection that focuses on the male experience of war, but includes women in ways that mirror the expanding role of women in all facets of society in the late twentieth century. Since its publication, *The Things They Carried* has joined the canon of war literature popularized by respected authors like Crane and Remarque. As *New York Times Book Review* editor Robert R. Harris wrote,

Only a handful of novels and short stories have managed to clarify, in any lasting way, the meaning of the war in Vietnam for America and for the soldiers who served there ... By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of the truth, [O'Brien] places *The Things They Carried* high up on the list of best fiction about any war. (A8)

O'Brien, who spent two years in combat, primarily focuses on the male experience. He opens his book by dedicating it to the male characters he creates in his fictional stories: "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Hemy Dobbins, and Kiowa." Despite this male-focused dedication, women are present, too: O'Brien's work features several important female characters that challenge the traditional literary stereotypes and bring women into the backdrop of war. By portraying women as significant characters in *The Things They Carried* and paralleling their experiences with those of the men who fought, O'Brien proves that women are as much a part of the war as men, despite the limited roles they were forced to play in the Vietnam conflict.

Although the majority of his stories are driven by the typical male experience of war, women are present in this piece of war literature in ways that break with and criticize

stereotypes. The essentialist concept of feminism argues that "women's physical differences alone (birthing, lactation, menstruation, etc.) make them more connected with matter or with the physical world" (Rivkin and Ryan 767), and in *The Things They Carried* O'Brien presents female characters who are connected with the land of Vietnam, the war and its atrocities, albeit differently than the men who fought. O'Brien creates rich female characters who are "innately capable of offering a different ethics from men, one more attuned to preserving the earth from destruction" (Rivkin and Ryan 767). Like the nurses who cared for the wounded, the women in O'Brien's stories care for the men, and they care about the impact of the Vietnam War on their world. In some cases, O'Brien even draws these women directly into the conflict, making them a figurative part of a conflict they were literally left out of in important ways. Thus, O'Brien's Vietnam War stories represent a new characterization of women in war literature, one which includes them rather than marginalizes them, and parallels the forward momentum noted by critics of the post-feminist era.

Susan Farrell and Pamela Smiley are two female literary critics who recognize the importance of O'Brien's contribution to shattering female stereotypes in literature. In doing so, they break from some of their contemporaries. Farrell agrees that much of the literature to emerge from the Vietnam War aligns with misogynistic stereotypes, but believes that O'Brien's work "stands apart from the genre as a whole. [He] is much more self-consciously aware of gender issues and critical of traditional gender dichotomies than are the bulk of U.S. writers about the Vietnam War" (2). She believes that male stereotypes do persist in *The Things They Carried*, but not at the expense of female characters or readers:

The male characters in the book do indeed subscribe to patriarchal and condescending attitudes about gender; they believe that knowledge is attained experientially and thus

they exclude women from understanding the war experience. Yet, always running counter to this view is its corrective: that trauma is communicable, that understanding may be attained through the imaginative acts of storytelling and reading, and that the male characters do not necessarily understand war and gender as well as they think they do. (Farrell 2)

O'Brien presents male characters who "subscribe to patriarchal and condescending attitudes about gender" because such soldiers existed; their presence cannot be ignored. However, he works diligently as an author to communicate the truth of Vietnam to male and female readers alike, to include women who had been excluded, and that sets him apart from other veteran authors.

Smiley, too, believes that O'Brien's work defies gender and invites women into the experience of war. She calls this "the central project of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, to make [women] understand their brothers, friends and lovers who went to Vietnam. This O'Brien (the author) accomplishes through a series of female characters ... through whom he de-genders war, constructs an ideal (female) reader, and re-defines American masculinity" (Smiley 602). According to both Farrell and Smiley, O'Brien draws women into his writing in new and interesting ways – he does not pretend that women were fully included in the Vietnam War, but he does make a concerted effort to include them in his retelling of it, through accessible writing and richly drawn female characters. He fairly and innovatively makes room for women in the Vietnam War experience. Both of these critics note that this sets O'Brien apart from his peers.

Chief among critics who disagree with Farrell and Smiley is Lorrie N. Smith, who explores the depictions of female characters in O'Brien's stories, which were initially published in *Esquire* magazine before the 1990 publication of *The Things They Carried*. Her assertion is

that although O'Brien possesses an "established position as one of the most important veteran writers of the Vietnam War," his works possess "an obsession with and ambivalence about representations of masculinity and femininity" (16) differing little from misogynistic war literature of previous decades:

[O'Brien's] text offers no challenge to a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced. My intent in bringing this subtext to light is not to devalue O'Brien's technical skill or emotional depth, but to account for my own discomfort as a female reader and to position *The Things They Carried* within a larger cultural project to rewrite the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective. (Smith 17)

Smith clearly – and I believe incorrectly – asserts that O'Brien excludes women from the war experience, and that O'Brien's text thus brings nothing new to the table for female readers. In fact, Smith's allegation that "O'Brien often depicts war as inaccessible to nonveterans, creating a storytelling loop between characters within stories that excludes the uninitiated reader and privileges the authority of the soldiers' experience" (18), does not match this reader's experience with *The Things They Carried*. Farrell and Smiley, both supportive of O'Brien's efforts to include women, analyze the same stories from O'Brien's collection that Smith does, and in doing so, they present the opposing viewpoint: that O'Brien's female characters are, in fact, strong women who comprehend the Vietnam War and represent a new female type in war literature, and that O'Brien's writing is accessible to and inclusive of female readers.

By closely reading the stories in *The Things They Carried* which feature prominent female characters and analyzing the characters themselves, Smith's position

can be definitively refuted in favor of a new perspective of women in the context of the Vietnam War. Tim O'Brien's women are not merely "angels" or "monsters"; they are not relegated to the margins of his stories. Instead, they are participants, able to understand the war and its complexities and draw their own conclusions about it. By creating these dynamic female characters, O'Brien welcomes women into an experience they were largely kept from by the regulations and stereotypes of the time period – combat. He acknowledges that women were barred from directly participating in the Vietnam War to the same extent as his fellow soldiers, yet he draws female readers into his stories with his magnetic and accessible writing style. Though critics like Smith see O'Brien's characterization of women as typically misogynistic, the women in O'Brien's stories are complex, fully realized characters who are as changed by war as the soldiers themselves.

## **II. "The Things They Carried" and "Love": Martha**

In the title story of Tim O'Brien's collection, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is tortured by his unrequited, long-distance love for his college sweetheart, Martha. Jimmy and Martha, separated by Jimmy's draft notice after only one date, represent the youthful opportunities stolen by the Vietnam War – a promising young pair broken apart by the call of duty. Martha, who appears in this story and its brief follow-up, "Love," exists not only to enhance the story of Jimmy's experience, but to illustrate the impact of Vietnam on American women who emerged into a changed, post-conflict world, one in which, as Carol Acton notes, "the typical female stereotype of 'nice houses and loving husbands and kids'" (96) was destroyed.

Initially, Martha performs the expected role of women on the home front during war: that of supporting their soldiers abroad. Dutifully, Martha writes to Jimmy with regularity and

affection, signing her letters "Love, Martha" (1), and the letters are Jimmy's lifeline, so important that

he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending.

He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. (1)

The reverence with which Jimmy treats Martha's letters illustrates the importance of her role in his war experience; to him, she is a comfort amidst the chaos, love despite the violence. Martha sends Jimmy poems, photographs, and "a good-luck charm" (9), a pebble from the Jersey shore which she had carried close to her heart before sending it to Jimmy "as a token of her truest feelings for him" (9). Her letters are long and beautifully written. In this sense, in her faithful and genuine letter-writing, Martha fulfills the traditional duty of a woman left behind on the home front during a time of war.

Jimmy's perception of Martha as a comforting, if distant, presence, changes drastically and unfairly after the death of one of the soldiers in his charge. Jimmy sends Lee Strunk into an enemy tunnel on a routine search, and despite the heightened danger, "suddenly, without willing it, [Jimmy] was thinking about Martha ... he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed" (12). Despite the situation's inherent danger, Jimmy's ignorance, and O'Brien's set-up of Strunk as the obvious casualty, Strunk emerges from the tunnel unscathed, as though rising from a grave. Instead, it is another soldier, Ted Lavender, who is struck down by an unseen assailant, "shot in the head on his way

back from peeing" (13). Immediately, Jimmy, the lieutenant, blames himself – and because of the source of his distraction, he blames 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 ... he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. It went on for a long while. In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would. (16-17)

In deeming Martha "uninvolved" and part of a world "which was not quite real," Jimmy is placing her in a familiar role for a woman in war literature – outsider.

Until Ted Lavender's death, Jimmy views Martha as the "beautiful angel-woman" archetype noted by Gilbert and Gubar. After Lavender is shot, she becomes the miscast object of Jimmy's hatred and guilt. He rededicates himself to the war effort by burning her letters and photographs, and notes that in those letters, "Martha had never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself. She wasn't involved...He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love" (23). In this sense, by noting that Martha "belonged to another world" in which she could attend college and remain uninvolved – opportunities denied to Jimmy when he received his draft notice – he blames her for society's rules against allowing women to take part in fighting the war, a situation over which Martha herself has no control.

Although Jimmy's relegation of Martha to the status of war outsider is typical – and, in some ways, accurate – Tim O'Brien allows his reader to see the folly of Jimmy's actions and innovatively presents Martha as a participant, despite her physical absence. First, the most likely casualty in the story, Lee Strunk, is not the victim. Instead, Ted Lavender is killed by a hidden sniper after he "popped a tranquilizer and went off to pee" (12), separating himself both mentally and physically from the operation that Jimmy manages. The operation itself is a success despite Jimmy's preoccupation with Martha; Lavender's death is random, making Jimmy's guilt and his hatred of Martha misplaced. It is Jimmy's *perception* that Martha's presence in his thoughts is responsible for Lavender's death, not Martha's *actions*. As Jimmy notes and believes, she is an outsider, unable to take action. By burning the tokens of her affection and commitment, he intends to reinforce this idea. However, despite his destruction of her letters and photographs, he has every word, every image memorized and they are "in his head" (23), meaning that Martha is somehow present with Jimmy in Vietnam -not an outsider after all. Jimmy is confused about his feelings for Martha after burning her letters and photographs; O'Brien repeats the idea that "he loved her but he hated her" (23). Her image is actually imprinted on his mind, and he sees "Martha's gray eyes gazing back at him" (24) as he studies his maps and redirects his thoughts to the leadership of his men. O'Brien implies that Martha's presence, though it antagonizes Jimmy after Lavender's death, actually helps Jimmy do his duty as a soldier. This paradox, this presence and absence, makes Martha a more complicated and active figure than most traditional women characters in war literature.

In "Love," his brief follow-up to "The Things They Carried," Jimmy and Martha reunite ten years post-war. Both are significantly changed, furthering the idea that Martha is as affected by the war as her male counterpart. Neither Martha nor Jimmy has married; the traditional

American existence has, for them, become impossible. This reflects the experiences of many returning soldiers, who struggled with family and personal relationships after Vietnam. Martha is privy to that aspect of a soldier's experience. She has become a Lutheran missionary, serving in third-world nations in a capacity similar to that of the military. She, like Jimmy, is disillusioned by what she has seen of the world: her "eyes were gray and neutral," and Jimmy realizes "that there were things about her he would never know" (30). O'Brien does not go too far in equating Martha's experiences with those of Jimmy, who saw real combat. Martha laments "the things men do" (31) and the violent nature of war. But in her non-traditional choices and in her disillusionment with post-war society, Martha is more like the veterans of Vietnam than most female characters in war literature, who joyfully – sometimes ignorantly – welcome their husbands and sons home, moving forward without internalizing the truth of war. O'Brien's characterization of Martha is different because she participates – she is not solely an outsider in this predominantly male story. Particularly in "Love," Martha is indicative of contemporary women who recognize the outcomes of war and move far beyond the boundaries of old-fashioned womanhood, eschewing marriage and motherhood for more expanded, global roles.

Lorrie Smith believes that for the soldiers in "The Things They Carried," particularly Jimmy Cross, "[s]urvival itself depends on excluding women from the masculine bond" (24), but in fact the separation and exclusion Jimmy and his men undergo is circumstantial – it has nothing to do with gender. In fact, O'Brien's characterization of Martha in both "The Things They Carried" and "Love" is inclusive; though physically distant, she plays an important role in Jimmy's progression as a soldier. It is true, as Smith points out, that after Ted Lavender's death, Jimmy sees his obsession with Martha as "a distraction from the immediate work of war and caring for his men," and O'Brien uses that term in describing Jimmy's daily ritual with Martha's

letters: "Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter, then at full dark he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin" (4). But Smith believes that Jimmy's subsequent burning of Martha's letters represents a rejection of Martha specifically and of the female gender generally – this is not the case. There are two important points to be made about Jimmy's reaction to Ted Lavender's death: first, as detailed earlier, the death is a random, unpreventable act of war, and Jimmy's guilt is largely unfounded; second, his rejection of Martha is not misogynistic – it parallels every soldier's unfortunate need to cut ties with the folks back home and focus on the grisly task at hand. In this final regard, Martha provides aid to Jimmy that Smith fails to recognize.

When Ted Lavender is shot, O'Brien carefully sets up the scene: Lavender is not taking part in the operation overseen by Jimmy at the time, and he is shot while under the influence of drugs. Jimmy's guilt is somewhat understandable, as he is the leader of these men, but there is no culpability in Ted Lavender's death. In burning Martha's letters and destroying his distraction, Jimmy is trying to make sense of the insensible – the death of a young man during a controversial war. Therefore, Jimmy's rejection of Martha is also insensible, the act of a confused young man rather than "the renunciation of femininity" extolled by Smith (24). It is also typical, as many soldiers in Vietnam were forced to put home and family aside – gender notwithstanding – to carry out their duties in a part of the world that bore no resemblance to what they knew, as Jimmy does here. Further, although Jimmy burns Martha's letters, she remains in his head, "moving in the rain" (O'Brien 23) of the jungle as if present with him in Vietnam, far from Smith's repeated idea of female rejection. Quite the contrary – Martha has become a part of Jimmy. He sees "Martha's gray eyes gazing back at him" (O'Brien 24) as he recommits to his role as soldier and commander:

[Jimmy] went back to his maps. He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence. It wouldn't help Lavender, he knew that, but from this point on he would comport himself as an officer . . . On the march he would impose strict field discipline. He would be careful to send out flank security, to prevent straggling or bunching up, to keep his troops moving at the proper pace and the proper interval. He would insist on clean weapons. He would confiscate the remainder of Lavender's dope ... And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture . (O'Brien 24-25)

True, Martha is not actually present, but she is far from excluded; inadvertently, unknowingly, she refocuses Jimmy and helps him become the lieutenant he needs to be to survive the Vietnam War.

Smith's criticism of O'Brien extends beyond the exclusion of women to the understanding of women, and she sees Martha as the "prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding the war" (26). Martha only functions, as do all women in O'Brien's stories according to Smith, as a foil to the manly, warrior-like male characters. "Ultimately," Smith writes, "reading war, like experiencing, remembering, and writing it, is constructed as a masculine rite" (23). While it is true that the Vietnam War is seen as a conventionally male experience – women were, after all, excluded from combat by law and served in primarily administrative and medical capacities – O'Brien works to include women in the experience as much as possible, and presents Martha as a dynamic character able to understand the war from a unique perspective.

First, Martha's post-war experiences as a nurse and Lutheran missionary in third-world countries, outlined in "Love," contrast the customary path of American women of her

generation; she remains unmarried, and her work is similar to that of soldiers like Jimmy, who were asked to serve a greater good by traveling across the globe. O'Brien uses Martha to foreshadow the approach of new roles for American women, as the women's rights movement loomed on the horizon. In this way, she is not simply the "plot device" that Smith deems her. Second, the difficulty Martha experiences adjusting to post-war life parallels the difficulty experienced by returning Vietnam veterans. In fact, her ambivalence and sadness reflect symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly suffered by returning soldiers. When reunited with Jimmy, Martha is "neutral" and "cold" (O'Brien 30-31), unable to return his attempts at affection. Smith believes that this reaction "widens the gulf between men and women and hints ... that she is either repressed, fearful, uninterested, or a lesbian." The gulf exists, yes – O'Brien would be remiss if he didn't recognize it, as Martha and American women like her did not participate in combat in the 1960s and 1970s like Jimmy and his fellow soldiers. But Martha's behavior toward Jimmy after the war does not hint at repression, disinterest, or lesbianism. It shows that she, like many American women, were affected, haunted even, by the Vietnam War and the global changes it wrought despite their lack of direct involvement, a message O'Brien introduces in these early stories and continues to repeat in stories throughout his collection.

Susan Farrell also disagrees with Smith's view of the character of Martha. In fact, according to Farrell, the unreliable nature of Jimmy's imagination is proof that "readers are not supposed to make the same easy gender classifications that Cross does" (3) in "The Things They Carried." Just as Jimmy's guilt over Ted Lavender's death is misplaced and irrational, so, too, is his exaggerated, imaginary romance with Martha. The two shared one date before Jimmy left for war, and her letters are more obligatory than affectionate. Therefore, Jimmy's belief that Martha

is to blame for Lavender's death and his destruction of her letters are not tacit recognition by O'Brien that in order to be good soldiers, men must suppress and destroy femininity, as Smith believes. Rather, as Farrell says, they are "the attempts of a romantic and guilt-ridden young man to gain control over a situation in which he actually has very little power" (3), which O'Brien identifies as futile. Jimmy's attempt to eradicate Martha is meant to be seen as "mistaken and irrational" (Farrell 3). In "Love," Farrell points out, O'Brien actually portrays Martha and Jimmy as equals in the post-Vietnam world:

When Martha tells [Jimmy] about her life since college – her missionary service and the fact that she never married – O'Brien writes that "it occurred to Jimmy that there were things about her he would never know" (30). While her missionary background in the third world hints at hardship and self-sacrifice perhaps comparable to [Jimmy's] war experiences, neither Martha nor Jimmy Cross pursue a more detailed understanding of the other's life. The revised background on Martha should suggest to readers that she, too, had "things to carry," things that [Jimmy] cannot know any more than those who were not in Vietnam can comprehend the war experience. (Farrell 4)

Such a characterization of Martha certainly enhances the role of women in traditional war literature. She is more complex than the reader realizes when encountering her in "The Things They Carried," and her actions and demeanor in "Love" indicates that women could, indeed, share a soldier's uncertainty of life after experiencing such horror.

In her article "The Other Side of Grief: American Women and the Vietnam War," Maureen Ryan offers an analysis of the female experience of war that applies to Martha in O'Brien's story. Ryan argues that "war necessarily includes and affects women" (42), albeit differently than it includes and affects men:

[If] the female role on the front is commonly passive or secondary, the removal of men to the battlefield invokes a paradoxical empowerment of the women who are left at home to sustain the culture. Marginalized by the quintessential male experience of war, women are simultaneously enfranchised by their appropriation of the roles of earner, sole parent, active citizen. In [the twentieth] century, and especially in the years during after the war in Vietnam, as women have rebelled against the traditional parameters of female behavior and have moved (undoubtedly in part because of the wars that have validated them) into more active social roles, the position of women in wartime becomes increasingly complex and interesting. (Ryan 42)

O'Brien's Martha is an example of the women Ryan describes – kept from the battlefield, yes, but empowered at the same time by the absence of men at home. Post-war, Martha became a "trained nurse ... and she had done service in Ethiopia and Guatemala and Mexico" as a Lutheran missionary (O'Brien 30), evoking the "active citizen" Ryan describes (42). Martha never married, eschewing "traditional parameters of female behavior" (Ryan 42) and breaking the stereotype of a mid-twentieth century American girl. She is not, as Smith sees it, the "prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding the war" (26); she is much more like the "increasingly complex and interesting" women Ryan believes emerged after the Vietnam War (42). Martha, like Jimmy, has been truly, deeply affected by the war and its aftermath. In "Love," she no longer resembles the innocent college girl portrayed in the pictures Jimmy carries throughout his time in Vietnam. Like the men, she, too, is changed.

### **III. "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong": Mary Anne Bell**

Perhaps none of Tim O'Brien's female characters is as interesting as Mary Anne Bell in O'Brien's story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Marianne is the central character in a military fantasy story – a lonely soldier arranges to have his teenage girlfriend shipped to him in Vietnam. It's a story within a story, told by another soldier trying to both regale his friends with its wonder and convince them of its truth. Mary Anne is a figurative tool for O'Brien, a way to illustrate for his audience the very drastic impact war has on the presumably innocent youth required to fight it. A close, more literal study of Mary Anne's character, however, reveals a new female warrior archetype. With her, O'Brien brings female characters in war literature to a new level.

Mary Anne arrives in Vietnam a fresh-faced, stereotypical American teenage girl, ready and willing to face her new and uncertain environment. In many ways, she is an extreme version of every young American soldier shipped off to Vietnam in the 1960s – innocent, pure, vulnerable. The stereotypical nature of Mary Anne's character is emphasized upon her arrival at a remote medical outpost in the jungle – she is everything a young teenage girl should be, and O'Brien uses color and childhood imagery to highlight her freshness and innocence:

A tall, big-boned blonde ... she was seventeen years old, fresh out of Cleveland Heights Senior High. She had long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too ... Mary Anne Bell and Mark Fossie had been sweethearts since grammar school. From sixth grade on they had known for a fact that someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together. .. (105-6)

Mary Anne departs from the stereotype quickly, however; she embraces Vietnam and transgresses the boundaries assigned her by her boyfriend, his fellow soldiers, and society in general.

Mary Anne's departure from expectations proves problematic, in particular for her boyfriend, Mark Fossie. He brought Mary Anne to the war zone to play the role assigned her – the devoted girlfriend with "a bubbly personality, a happy smile" (106), there to provide companionship for Mark and ascetic pleasure for the girl-starved men of Alpha Company. Her refusal to conform to this typical role has startling consequences. Mary Anne's intelligence and daring surpass even that of the seasoned soldiers around her, and "the war intrigued her" (107). Unwilling to sit idly by in a war zone, she trains with the medics and takes care of critically wounded soldiers, unafraid. Quickly, "her face took on a sudden new composure, almost serene, the fuzzy blue eyes narrowing into a tight, intelligent focus" (109). The transformation from wide-eyed girl to hardened soldier has begun.

The change is comprehensive – physical as well as psychological – and her commitment to life as a soldier in Vietnam intimidates her male cohorts. The dexterity and speed with which Mary Anne adapts is seamless and even alarming, to the reader, to the soldiers on base, and, in particular, to her boyfriend, Mark. The trappings of teenage girlhood disappear as

she quickly fell into the habits of the bush. No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandana. Hygiene became a matter of small consequence. In her second week Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16, how the parts worked, and from there it was a natural progression to learning how to use the weapon ... as it turned out she had a real

knack for it. There was a new confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself. (109)

As her present circumstances transform her, Mary Anne's vision of the idyllic American dream changes as well. No longer does she want three kids, a house on the lake, marriage at a young age: "Maybe we 'll travel first," she tells Mark. "Maybe live together. Just test it out, you know?" (110). War is changing her.

While he is accommodating at first, Mark eventually attempts to assert himself in the traditionally male role – he puts his foot down when Mary Anne disappears one night with the Green Berets, the most elite division of soldiers, so dangerous that even the experienced soldiers around her refuse to "mess around with any Greenie types" (117). Upon her return, it is clear that she has become one of them, as Mark "had trouble recognizing her" in her "filthy green fatigues," her "face black with charcoal" (113). Immediately, Mark sets new ground rules, most evident in Mary Anne's appearance – she appears that night at dinner, wearing "a white blouse, a navy blue skirt, a pair of plain black flats" (113), subdued. This attempt to tame her is unsuccessful. Mary Anne is beyond reformation; she cannot be the innocent girl she was upon arrival in Vietnam, because she is a soldier now: "It was as if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man's-land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle" (115), the same uncertain space in which so many Vietnam veterans were caught as a result of their unspeakable experiences.

At the end of the story, Mary Anne disappears into the jungle, never to be heard from again, an extreme version of reality for Vietnam veterans who returned home transformed, never to become again the innocent boys they were when drafted, never able to fully explain the war to those who did not experience it. Mary Anne, a woman, goes to places that the soldiers around her

will not; Mary Anne, a woman, is O'Brien's symbol of the transformative impact of war, the tool with which he opens up the war experience to everyone, male and female alike. Although Mary Anne's story is a fantasy in many respects, she represents a new way of looking at war through a multi-gendered lens – the transformative war experience is not solely relegated to men.

O'Brien's characterization of Mary Anne in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is complicated, and Smith's criticism of it has many layers. Smith asserts that, like Martha, Mary Anne exists merely to enhance male characters: "the figure of a woman is the other against which masculine identity and innocence are sympathetically defined" (32). Smith focuses on appearance versus reality in her critique – the idea that while Mary Anne appears to understand war, she is only able to do so after acquiring masculine traits:

O'Brien's ingenious twist is to create a woman who understands war because "she was there. She was up to her eyeballs in it." Of course, being there and understanding war are only conceived in masculine terms – fighting – rather than any of the other roles women actually did play in Vietnam, for the masculine point of view prevails here. The story appears to be deconstructing gender indifference by imagining a woman warrior, suggesting that even women can be corrupted by war. In fact, though, it portrays the woman as more masculine than the men, hence monstrous and unnatural ... Gender difference temporarily blurs but ultimately gets resolved into the old oppositions, and women are warned against disrupting patriarchal order and assuming power assigned to men. (32)

True, O'Brien does not portray women as nurses or clerks, actual positions held by American female military personnel during the Vietnam War. However, this does not negate his portrayal of women in general – Mary Anne in particular is not meant to be a historically accurate

character, and O'Brien is known to write from experience. His experience was combat. Contrary to Smith's opinion, O'Brien does succeed in "suggesting that *even* women can be corrupted by war" (Smith 32). In "Love," Martha is distant and even cold, affected by war even though she wasn't there. Here, in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Mary Anne undergoes a dramatic transformation, not from female to male, but from innocent to warrior, representative of the dramatic and irreversible change undergone by all soldiers who fought this polemic conflict.

Though Smith believes that Mary Anne exists simply to enhance the reader's sympathy for the male characters, the true soldiers and heroes, O'Brien infuses Mary Anne with a complexity that allows her to stand alone as a character. She is much deeper than Smith considers her to be. She does not "function [solely] to solidify male bonds and validate the humanity of the more 'normal' soldiers" (Smith 36). In fact, Rat Kiley, the soldier who tells Mary Anne's story, uses her as a cautionary tale about what could happen to any of the men in Vietnam, and sees her as one of them, regardless of her gender:

What happened to her, Rat said, was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same. A question of degree. Some make it intact, some don't make it at all. For Mary Anne Bell, it seemed, Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something ... you're in touch with the far side of yourself, as though it's another hemisphere, and you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself. (O'Brien 123-124)

By noting that this "happened to all of them" and by using the pronoun "you," O'Brien, through the narration of Rat Kiley, equates Mary Anne with Rat and his fellow soldiers – she becomes

part of the fellowship. She is not seen by the men as a "B-movie 'joke,'" as Smith declares (36). On the contrary, as the passage above indicates, Rat takes Mary Anne quite seriously. When she disappears, it is not because O'Brien is flummoxed by her female presence and "cannot imagine an ending for such a story" (Smith 36). Her disappearance parallels the figurative disappearance of all of the young boys who were sent to war and never came back the same – or tragically, never came back at all. Mary Anne is no joke, and she's no prop – she is literal and figurative at once, making her a complicated character in her own right. She is also, despite Smith's allegation, no man.

Smith sees Mary Anne's transformation in Vietnam as that of a woman transforming almost completely into a man, and in Smith's analysis, O'Brien's message is that such defeminization is necessary in order for any person to truly understand war; therefore, women cannot understand war. The problem is that Smith does not clearly prove that Mary Anne becomes fully masculine – she even contradicts herself at times. For example, Smith writes that as "Mary Anne 'learns' about Vietnam, the narrator's descriptions change from conventionally feminine to more masculine terms" (33) and she proceeds to list several phrases that O'Brien uses to illustrate Mary Anne's conversion: "tight, intelligent focus," "confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself" (O'Brien 109, qtd. in Smith 33). Is it impossible for Smith to believe that a woman could possess such qualities as intelligence, focus, confidence, and authority? Or is it impossible for Smith to believe that male authors like O'Brien could believe it?

True, Mary Anne abandons some of her feminine ways; she stops wearing cosmetics, she cuts her hair short, and she no longer files her nails. But O'Brien presents these as natural consequences of a soldier's life in the jungle, not as indications of a more masculine demeanor.

Smith further quotes O'Brien when he writes that Mary Anne's "body seemed foreign somehow – too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be. The bubbiness was gone. The nervous giggling, too" (O'Brien 110). Though these descriptions are claimed by Smith as evidence of Mary Anne's continuing masculinization, they can just as easily describe the transition of any person – male or female – from civilian to soldier. The body becomes harder because of the extreme physicality, and the giggling and bubbiness disappear because of the extreme violence. Later in her essay, Smith compares Mary Anne to Medusa. Mary Anne, now a "Greenie," wears a necklace of tongues which Smith equates with "Medusa's snakes." In this comparison, Smith contradicts her earlier statement that Mary Anne becomes a man – the mythological Medusa is very much that of a woman. Monstrous, yes, but female. Interestingly, according to Greek mythology, Medusa's detached head ends up on the shield of Athena, female goddess of wisdom and warfare. Perhaps this goddess would be the more astute comparison for the warrior Mary Anne.

Once again, Susan Farrell responds to Lorrie Smith's criticism of O'Brien's portrayal of a female character. Smith admonishes O'Brien for treating Mary Anne the only way he knows how, by "appropriat[ing] masculine power within a female body" and banishing her from the male hierarchy at the story's conclusion (36). Farrell, however, sees Mary Anne as a boundary breaker, a "character who refuses to follow rules, to stay where she 'belongs,' [who] deconstructs American imperialistic tendencies as well as traditional gender imperatives" (11). She is not so much becoming masculine as she is bending and breaking the rules of gender bias, and in doing so liberating herself – and other women.

Farrell concedes that at the beginning of "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "gender roles are carried out in accordance with traditional Western stereotypes about men and women"

(7). Mary Anne is the classic, American, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, girl next door, and she is brought in to Vietnam to provide comfort and sexual release for the men. However, these stereotypes are quickly debunked as Mary Anne takes part in the day-to-day work of war. If she is masculinized, it is only to parallel the feminization of her boyfriend, Mark Fossie, and call into question the role of gender in war:

When Mary Anne transgresses Fossie's narrow expectations of what a woman should be, he can only imagine her as becoming more like a man. Fossie's discomfort reaches its climax one night when Mary Anne doesn't return to their shared bunker. .. At this point, the sweethearts have exchanged gender roles. Fossie is described in terms similar to those initially used for Mary Anne – he is young, tall, blond, nice, polite and good-hearted. When the power in the relationship shifts from Mark Fossie to Mary Anne Bell, so do the men's perceptions of their gender attributes. (Farrell 9)

When Mary Anne transgresses traditional gender roles, she does not need to become male in order to understand war. She is simply adapting to her environment, allowing war to change her the way it has changed the men. Mary Anne's transformation makes Mark Fossie, Rat Kiley, and the other soldiers uncomfortable, but O'Brien uses this: she "expands their notions of what is possible" (Farrell 11). Thus, Farrell cohesively disproves Smith's thesis and proves that O'Brien's portrayal of female characters is the opposite of misogynistic. In fact, gender has nothing to do with the ability of war to change a person – anyone who experiences it is transformed.

Tim O'Brien himself responded to the gender issue presented in "Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" in an interview for the *Indiana Review*. He based his story on an apocryphal one he heard

more than once about a young high school girl having visited during the war, and he began to see it as a possibility.

Logistically it was wholly believable. All you had to do was buy a plane ticket and fly from Cleveland to LA to Bangkok to Saigon. There was nothing to prevent civilians from coming into the country. And there were many civilians there. I mean, there were *lots* of them. More than had been written about ... So the story didn't seem quite as impossible to me when I began thinking about it seriously. The only thing that really stops a person from believing the story is gender. Could a woman be sucked into war the way that a man could be? (O'Brien qtd. in Hicks 88)

Ultimately, O'Brien believes that the answer is yes: "Women are capable of violence" (O'Brien qtd. in Hicks 89). Smith claims that Mary Anne Bell's story is about "defending men's homosocial bonds against all threat of feminine invasion" (32), yet O'Brien here equates women and men, inviting women into the experience of war. O'Brien even notes that "what happens in the story is essentially what I went through" (O'Brien qtd. in Hicks 89). Male, female – it's interchangeable to O'Brien. Even Rat Kiley, O'Brien's creation and the storyteller in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," recognizes that gender has little to do with Mary Anne's change:

What's so impossible about that? She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a [woman] for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude. (O'Brien 116-17).

In her article, Farrell quotes O'Brien: "My feeling is that what happened to me as a man in Vietnam could happen to a woman as well. And the reasons it didn't were reasons of sociology and demography, not a difference in spirit" (O'Brien qtd. in Farrell 7). Smith believes that Mary Anne's characterization is the result of O'Brien's sexist assertion that women cannot take part in war unless they become men. O'Brien, however, tells readers that gender has little to do with war's ability to change a person. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," as in the rest of O'Brien's work, women are capable of understanding and being changed by the traditionally male experience of war.

#### **IV. "The Lives of the Dead": Linda**

The final story in Tim O'Brien's collection moves back and forth in time, chronicling the fictional O'Brien's experiences with his first love, Linda, alongside his encounters with death in Vietnam and his reflections upon them as a writer twenty years later. Linda, unlike any of the other female characters in the book, is a child – nine years old – and because she dies at that age, she remains frozen in time and in O'Brien's memory. As a soldier in Vietnam, O'Brien's memories of Linda resurface when he encounters corpses for the first time since attending her wake as a fourth grader. Linda is connected to O'Brien's emotional response to death, even in the context of war; O'Brien's love for her makes him internalize her, and her grace and dignity in facing her mortality provide an example for O'Brien in the midst of his fellow soldiers' undignified and callous view of death. This little girl becomes an important figure in O'Brien's war experience, and in this final story the fictional O'Brien internalizes her memory to such an extent that he himself is feminized.

O'Brien goes to great lengths to describe the intensity of his brief and innocent childhood relationship with Linda, convincing readers that we should not write off their feelings for each other as mere "puppy love":

Linda was nine then, as I was, but we were in love. And it was real. When I write about it now, three decades later, it's tempting to dismiss it as a crush, an infatuation of childhood, but I know for a fact that what we felt for each other was as deep and rich as love can ever get. It had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure such things ... Even then, at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones – *that kind of love.* (258)

The intensity of O'Brien's description leaves little doubt of either his feelings or Linda's importance, to his life and to the story. When he thinks of her "three decades later," despite the passing of time, O'Brien remains convinced that their love for each other was as real as any comparable adult relationship. He notes that their connection "had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love," a description which initiates O'Brien's characterization of Linda herself as mature beyond her years. And it is significant that even at a young age, he wanted to become part of her, "to live inside her body," an idea that emphasizes her importance to the adult version of O'Brien's character as well. O'Brien's deep and abiding affection for Linda, and his delineation of her lasting impact on him, signify that Linda has not been relegated to the margins of this story – she is very much an active participant.

Despite the brevity of their encounter, Linda plays an important role in young Tim's life, extending even beyond her death. Her impact begins with their first date – typical in its youthful

awkwardness, but unusual in its adult intensity. Nine-year-old Tim can barely look Linda in the eye as he escorts her to the movies, yet at the same time he believes that he "had important things to tell her, big profound things" (258). Linda's nature is unusual for a girl of nine. She "had poise and great dignity" (258) – words usually reserved to describe accomplished adults. She certainly battles adult demons, hiding her brain surgery scars under a stocking cap and enduring her classmates' teasing as she faces her own imminent death. Linda responds to the taunts of the schoolyard bully calmly, with the dignity O'Brien uses to describe her, "as if none of it really mattered" (263), even when that bully manages to remove her cap, revealing her scars – and her mortality.

O'Brien describes the moment when young Tim sees Linda's bald head, using imagery reminiscent of corpses and reflective of the bodies soldier Tim sees in Vietnam:

Even now, when I think back on it, I can still see the glossy whiteness of her scalp. She wasn't bald. Not quite. Not completely ... But what I saw then, and keep seeing now, is all that whiteness. A smooth, pale, translucent white. I could see the bones and veins; I could see the exact structure of her skull. There was a large Band-Aid at the back of her head, a row of black stitches, a piece of gauze taped above her left ear. (264)

Thus, young Tim sees the corpse-like body of the dying Linda, his first true glimpse of death, but because Tim also knows and even loves Linda, he understands the dignity – a word O'Brien frequently uses in the story – that exists behind every human life, past and present. Once again, Linda reacts to this invasion of privacy with poise; "she cried for a while" (264), but she quickly moved on to finger-painting and quiz-taking. In this way, Linda's wisdom and maturity serve as young Tim's first lesson in the nature of death and dying, a lesson he would take with him to Vietnam.

After Linda's death, young Tim internalizes her, regularly bringing her back to life in his dreams and then bringing her and her lessons about death into his life as a soldier. His relationship with Linda allows Tim O'Brien the soldier to feel the impact of death, rather than become desensitized as his fellow soldiers do. From the moment young Tim hears the news of Linda's death, he uses his memories of her to bring her back to him, "closing my eyes and whispering her name, almost begging, trying to make her come back" (266). When she finally appears,

All her hair had grown back. The scars and stitches were gone. In the dream, if that's what it was, she was playing a game of some sort, laughing and running up the empty street, kicking a big aluminum water bucket ... A nine-year-old girl, just a kid, and yet there was something ageless in her eyes – not a child, not an adult – just a bright ongoing evenness, that same pinprick of absolute lasting light that I see today in my own eyes ...  
(266)

The version of Linda present in young Tim's dreams, healthy and lacking the scars of disease, is symbolic of life's power over death. "Once you're alive," dream-Linda tells Tim, "you can't ever be dead" (272). By noting that he and Linda share "the same pinprick of absolute lasting light" in their eyes, adult Tim understands that Linda has become a part of him. Even decades after her death, he is "forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way" (273) in daydreams and stories. Like Jimmy Cross does to Martha, Tim internalizes Linda, carrying her with him to Vietnam and beyond. When young Tim views her body at her wake, he is startled by the difference between the Linda he knew and the body he sees: "[t]here was a resemblance, maybe ... but even so I couldn't find much to recognize" (270). This discrepancy, between Linda's physical body and Linda's life, her presence in young Tim's mind,

teaches Tim that the corpse is not the person. This respect for Linda's life above and beyond her death leads Tim the soldier, later in the story, to disdain the contempt with which his fellow soldiers treat the bodies they encounter in Vietnam.

The fictional O'Brien's first encounter with a corpse in Vietnam brings Linda back to him again, and rather than join his fellow soldiers in their disrespectful ritual of shaking the dead body's hand, he becomes overwhelmed with memories of her. O'Brien's unit sweeps through an abandoned, burned-out village after an air strike, coming upon the lonely body of "an old man who lay face-up near a pigpen at the center of the village" (255-56). As he watches his fellow soldiers approach the body and mockingly shake hands, O'Brien reacts emotionally:

I was brand new to the war. It was my fourth day; I hadn't yet developed a sense of humor. Right away, as if I'd swallowed something, I felt a moist sickness rise up in my throat. I sat down beside the pigpen, closed my eyes, put my head between my knees.  
(256)

Despite their insistence, O'Brien refuses to join the others in their ritual – a brave stance for a new soldier to take. When one soldier tells O'Brien that he'll get used to it in time, O'Brien disagrees, simultaneously noting that "all day long I'd been picturing Linda's face, the way she smiled" (257). She is there with him, in Vietnam, connected to his emotional response to death in a place where death becomes all too real for him. In this sense, Linda is an important character, indeed.

Lorrie Smith's criticism of author Tim O'Brien's characterization of Linda is contradictory; she seems uncertain about how to classify Linda alongside the other female characterizations which she has deemed misogynistic. Smith even notes that "it sounds

ungenerous to critique such a moving and lovely story" (38). She does so anyway, following up this description of the story with a question:

[O]ne must wonder whether the book's only positive and unthreatening representation of femininity is possible because she is forever pre-pubescent, safely encased in memory, dream, death, and narrative. Unlike Martha or Mary Anne ... she never grows up to be a ... savage monster. She never touches the war, thus never intrudes upon his homosocial bonds; rather, the narrator uses her, as male writers have always used female muses, to find his voice and arrive at his own understanding of his traumas. (Smith 38)

Linda, however, does "touch the war." True, she is not alive during the Vietnam conflict; Martha is, and she is at home writing letters to Jimmy Cross; Mary Anne is, and she is physically present in the war zone. However, Linda is on Tim's mind as he encounters death in combat. When he sees his first dead body in Vietnam, he pictures "Linda's face, the way she smiled" (257). As a forty-three year old man writing stories about Vietnam, she is with him; he dreams her alive alongside "Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed" (255), all of them soldiers who died during the war. By equating Linda with his fellow soldiers, the fictional O'Brien places great importance on her memory and on her influence on his war experience. He also bonds her with these men in his mind. Also, though Linda's death at the age of nine does in some ways keep her "forever pre-pubescent," as Smith writes (38), O'Brien consistently characterizes Linda as mature beyond her years, linking her to the adult world and thus equating her with the other, adult female characters in his stories. Linda's impact on Tim as a boy and a man is similar to Martha's impact on Jimmy Cross – both female characters have been internalized by the men, present in their minds, dreams, and imaginations as they experience war. Through his memories of Linda's death, Tim understands and respects the "lives

of the dead" far more deeply than his fellow soldiers do. That makes Linda important, and that makes her part of the experience of Vietnam.

Smith concedes that O'Brien "gives Linda a voice" (37), and that in doing so he creates a feminine voice within himself. This is an interesting statement that runs counter to her assertion that O'Brien "offers no challenge to a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced" (17). Although Linda's characterization and presence in Vietnam is figurative, it is relevant, and it defines an important aspect of Tim's development as a soldier – his beliefs about death and dying. Smith also notes that Linda "is the mediator that facilitates the narrator's reconciliation with his own past in Vietnam and his recovery of a whole self" (38). Tim's reconciliation and recovery are important elements of his war experience, and here Smith ascribes Linda great power by naming her as mediator. It is interesting that a little girl, long dead, should have such power, but this speaks to the power of this female character in the story, and in the work as a whole. Smith further argues that

[i]t is tempting to read [O'Brien's] self as universally human, but the force of the whole preceding book cautions us that it is a masculine §.@ plihdefllli.j war and recovered in war stories. Women can only play dead or absent muse to the central masculine subject.

(38)

Again, women's absence in combat during Vietnam was a condition of O'Brien's experience there, beyond his control. What he is able to do, however, in this and other stories, is bring female characters in, make them part of the stories despite the fact that they weren't physically present on the front lines. Linda is crucial to Tim's understanding of an inherent aspect of war – death – and because he recalls her in dreams and visions throughout his time in Vietnam, she is

present, and therefore an important part of the "self" that he recovers after the war. So important, that as a writer post-war he brings her back again, into the narrative: he reminds us throughout "The Lives of the Dead" that he is forty-three years old and "a writer now" (264), and in that role, "I want to save Linda's life. Not her body – her life" (265). And he wants to do so in a war story – a place where women do not traditionally belong.

In "Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of *The Things They Carried*," Susan Farrell asserts her belief that "O'Brien deliberately juxtaposes traumatic war deaths with the traumatic death of Linda in order to undermine the old cliché of Vietnam War fiction: 'if you weren't there, you can't possibly understand'" (12). Linda's death is just as traumatic to young Tim as are the deaths of soldier O'Brien's fellow soldier comrades-in-arms Ted Lavender, Kiowa, and Curt Lemon; that is why he sees them all together in his mind throughout the story. Linda is, therefore, like the soldiers in importance. Pamela Smiley goes further in "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*" when she writes of "The Lives of the Dead," "instead of an act of uncompromised masculinity signaling the boy is now a man, O'Brien's character appropriates the feminine, becoming an androgynous fusion of preadolescent Timmy and Linda" (603). It is true that the adult Tim, the writer, tells us that "at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones" (258). After Linda dies, young Tim internalizes her so thoroughly that she is still with him when he goes to Vietnam, and then decades later, when he writes about it. She is part of him – O'Brien the author and the character has actually internalized a female character by the end of the work.

## V. "How to Tell a True War Story": Curt Lemon's sister; the woman at the reading

"How to Tell a True War Story" is arguably the most complex story in O'Brien's collection. It is many things at once: a collection of anecdotes about the war, told from different points of view; a reflection on the power and difficulties of storytelling; a treatise on truth and its importance – or lack of importance – to war stories. At its heart, the story deals with the nearly impossible task of communicating the true experience of war to those who've never fought it, and the equally important task of continuing to try, through storytelling. And Lorrie Smith is correct in calling "How to Tell a True War Story" "the most confrontational toward the reader" (29). The characters in the story are upset and angered by their inability to communicate with their respective audiences, and they lash out with some of the most offensive language in the book. In particular, the story portrays two negative encounters with women, and misogyny is not only present, it is aggressive and provocative. However, the men of the story do not succeed in reasserting their power by denigrating women, as Smith suggests. Rather, O'Brien the author uses the misogyny of his male characters to illustrate yet another element of the emotional damage war can cause.

The primary encounter with a woman in the story happens when Rat Kiley, a soldier in the character O'Brien's company, writes a letter to the sister of his friend Curt Lemon, who was killed in Vietnam. Lemon dies a horrific death, witnessed by Rat and the other soldiers. While the men took a break from a grueling hike "in deep jungle ... Lemon and Rat Kiley started goofing" (O'Brien 77), and "Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead" (O'Brien 85). As with several other deaths portrayed in *The Things They Carried*, this one is truly senseless: Lemon does not die while engaged in battle with the enemy, but rather while engaged in something akin to child's play, an innocent and enjoyable moment amidst the chaos of war in Vietnam. To express his

grief, Rat Kiley writes a letter to Lemon's sister, the content of which is narrated to us by O'Brien the character:

Rat tells her what a great brother she had, how together the guy was, a number one pal and comrade. A real soldier's soldier, Rat says. Then he tells a few stories to make the point, how her brother would always volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer for in a million years, dangerous stuff, like doing recon or going out on these really badass night patrols. Stainless steel balls, Rat tells her. The guy was a little crazy, for sure, but crazy in a good way, a real daredevil, because he liked the challenge of it, he liked testing himself, just man against gook. (O'Brien 75)

Though the letter so far has appropriately relayed Rat's grief and portrayed Lemon as a good soldier, at this point, the content becomes sharply inappropriate, a change hinted at by Rat's language – "badass," "stainless steel balls," "gook." The letter takes on a more shocking tone:

[Rat] gets all teary telling about the good times they had together, how her brother made the war seem almost fun, always raising hell and lighting up villes and bringing smoke to bear every which way. A great sense of humor, too. Like the time at this river when he went fishing with a whole damn crate of hand grenades. Probably the funniest things in world history, Rat says, all that gore, about twenty zillion dead gook fish. Her brother, he had the right attitude. He knew how to have a good time. On Halloween, this real hot spooky night, the dude paints up his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask and hikes over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16. A tremendous human being, Rat says. Pretty nutso sometimes, but you could trust him with your life. (O'Brien 75-76)

In attempting to convey his friend's good qualities, Rat has unwittingly painted a callous and violent picture, and he has alienated his audience in the process. Writing the letter is clearly cathartic for the grieving Rat, who "almost bawls writing it ... [he] pours his heart out. He says he loved the guy" (O'Brien 75-76). He is understandably upset, then, when he doesn't receive a response from Curt Lemon's sister; his choice to refer to her as "a dumb cooze" (O'Brien 76), however, is shocking and offensive. O'Brien the character reinforces the shock by noting that Rat "does not say bitch ... He says cooze" (O'Brien 76). The tone of misogyny is clear and intentional. The question is, is it true? Does it have a purpose beyond its shock value?

In a story that stretches the boundaries of truth – O'Brien declares that the story is true in the opening line, then knowingly constructs a piece of fiction – it is necessary to question the truth of Rat's feelings about Curt Lemon's sister. First, Rat's reaction to Lemon's sister's silence speaks more about Rat than it does about Lemon's sister, who we never meet. While O'Brien notes that it is "sad" that Curt Lemon's sister never wrote back, he also notes that Rat is "nineteen years old – it's too much for him – so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says *cooze*, because his friend is dead" (76-77). O'Brien emphasizes Rat's immaturity, that while he is a "killer," as any soldier is, he's also "sad" and "gentle," and only nineteen. His choice of word to describe Lemon's sister is made "because his friend is dead" and not because it's necessarily the truth – Rat has never met her – and, therefore, the word loses much of its chauvinistic power. Rat is certainly not portrayed in this story as a powerful man attempting to assert his dominance; he is a sad, grieving kid who cannot make sense of his best friend's senseless death in war, and he lashes out at an undeserving victim. Like Jimmy Cross unfairly blaming Martha for Ted Lavender's death and burning her letters in the opening story, Rat

unfairly insults Curt Lemon's sister for not understanding the violence of a war she and other women have been circumstantially excluded from, and he reacts accordingly.

Second, the content of Rat's letter to Curt Lemon's sister makes her reaction understandable to the reader. The stories Rat tells, which to him are evidence of Lemon's "great sense of humor" and "tremendous" nature (O'Brien 75-76), are to any civilian, male or female, disturbing. Another version of Curt Lemon's antics on Halloween, "almost stark naked, the story went, just boots and balls and an M-16" (O'Brien 268), is told by Rat in "Lives of the Dead," and it is even more suggestive of violence:

"See, what happens is, it's like four in the morning, and Lemon sneaks into a hootch with that weird ghost mask on. Everybody's asleep, right? So he wakes up this cute little mama-san. 'Hey, Mama-san – trick or treat!' Should've seen her *face*. About freaks. I mean, there's this buck naked ghost standing there, and he's got this M-16 up against her ear and he whispers, 'Hey, Mama-san, trick or fuckin' treat!' Then he takes off her pj's. Strips her right down. Sticks the pajamas in his sack and tucks her into bed and heads for the next hootch." (O'Brien 268)

Clearly, even Rat's seemingly tame version of the story in "How to Tell a True War Story" is an inappropriate one to relay to Curt's family as they mourn his death. Rat's intended message is lost on Lemon's sister, as the true experience of war often is lost on those who do not fight it, whether they are male or female. In a story Mitchell Sanders tells in "How to Tell a True War Story," even those who are supposed to understand war do not understand Vietnam: when called to answer to a male colonel, Mitchell says, a group of soldiers "just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare ... It says, man, you got *wax* in your ears. It says, poor bastard, you'll never know" (O'Brien 82-83). O'Brien

constructs this story, then, to ensure that our sympathy is with Curt Lemon's sister, that her silence is understandable, that Rat's response to it is misguided.

It is not surprising that Lorrie Smith finds "How to Tell a True War Story" to be irretrievably misogynistic. She claims that in this story, "traditional manhood ... is ferociously reasserted" and "male powerlessness is overcome through the repulsion of femininity" (29). Yet, by highlighting Rat's youth and inexperience – "he's nineteen years old – it's too much for him" (O'Brien 76-77) – O'Brien characterizes Rat as more a boy than a man, opposing Smith's idea of "traditional manhood." Rat's "repulsion" of Curt Lemon's sister is an emotional response; aggressive and offensive, yes, but it is the response of a hurt, grieving young man, not a traditional, manly hero. And though Rat uses harsh language in lashing out at Lemon's sister, he has not asserted any actual power over her. He's never met her. Therefore, Smith's assertion that "male powerlessness is overcome through the repulsion of femininity" is simply untrue. Rat's use of the sexist and repulsive term "cooze" is ironic, in that it establishes his immaturity and helplessness – not his power.

Susan Farrell agrees, disputing Smith and noting that "a careful reading of the letter Rat writes to Curt's sister shows that author Tim O'Brien deliberately crafts it to highlight certain ironies overlooked by narrator Tim O'Brien who is telling the story" (5). Farrell analyzes the juxtapositions present in the letter, in which Rat follows his "excessively macho and racist language" (5) with exceeding praise for Lemon. For example: "[Curt] liked testing himself, just man against gook. A great, great guy" (O'Brien 75). This technique escalates as the letter continues, with Rat describing the disturbing Halloween incident as an example of Curt knowing "how to have a good time" (O'Brien 76). It is evident, according to Farrell, that "author O'Brien wants us to consider how such assertions might affect Curt's sister, who has never met Rat and

who lives in a different world entirely, not desensitized to the violence and horror of war as Rat and his buddies are" (5). O'Brien the author wants his reader to understand the perspective of Curt Lemon's sister in not responding to Rat's inappropriate letter, as much as if not more than we understand Rat's offensive response to this perceived rejection.

Farrell also points out that Rat ends his letter to Lemon's sister by telling her "he'll look her up when the war's over" (O'Brien 76), which she sees as a clever design on author O'Brien's part:

O'Brien places this paragraph to immediately precede the information that the sister never answers Rat's letter. The attentive reader should not be surprised by this news. We are meant to imagine the effect that such a brutal letter would have on Curt's sister. Rat's insistence that he is just like Curt, after having told such disturbing stories about him, and even more, his promise (threat?) to look the sister up after the war, are surely enough to ensure that he'll never hear from her again. (Farrell 5)

Close analysis of Rat Kiley's letter leads the reader to sympathize with Curt Lemon's sister and to understand her lack of response, even if Rat Kiley himself does not.

Smith's premise rests on her belief that O'Brien constructs the story to make the reader sympathize with Rat "because of the suffering he has undergone and to forgive him the violence of his reaction to Curt Lemon's death" (Farrell 5). However, Farrell's analysis reveals author O'Brien's true intention:

Readers are not supposed to simply sympathize with Rat here, but to see past him. Part of the tragedy of these soldiers' experience in Vietnam is that the war has taught them that macho posturing and brutality are the norm. Rat is so immersed in the violence of his experience that he cannot imagine the effect his letter might have on Curt's sister. (5)

Just as author O'Brien carefully constructs Rat's letter, he also carefully chooses the offensive language Rat uses to describe Lemon's sister. Such words were used by the men who fought in Vietnam, and it would have been disingenuous to suggest otherwise. They were used by the women, too, as Carol Acton points out in her examination of Vietnam nurses and their autobiographies. Nurse Winnie Smith shocks her family, her mother in particular, with her violent language and "'unladylike' swearing" (Acton 104) when she returns home. Offensive language is not solely a trait of men; it is a trait of all who experience war. Lorrie Smith incorrectly suggests, however, that Rat's misogynistic language in "How to Tell a True War Story" is meant to denigrate Lemon's sister and, by extension, all women. She does not read past the surface to the true meaning of the story, which exposes the fragile, emotional –even unmanly –nature of the men sent to fight in Vietnam. The misogyny of soldiers like Rat does not breed power –it breeds sadness and sympathy.

Another problem Smith has with "How to Tell a True War Story" comes with the very brief introduction of a nameless female character, a woman present at a reading performed by the character Tim O'Brien, a writer in the decades following the war (Smith 31). This woman is a composite of several women who respond similarly to the character O'Brien's works, and she takes up a mere half-page of the entirety of *The Things They Carried*. The character O'Brien, now forty-three years old, uses the same term to describe her that Rat used to describe Curt Lemon's sister during the war. This particular encounter happens after the character O'Brien tells his audience a troubling story about his fellow soldiers torturing a baby water buffalo:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't

understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*. (O'Brien 90)

This woman is certainly problematic when arguing that the author Tim O'Brien includes and distinguishes women in his work in respectful and meaningful ways. This incident certainly reads, at first glance, like one between a stereotypical woman ignorant about war's reality and a stereotypical veteran fed up with such ignorance in the opposite gender. It is important to remember that both this woman and this version of Tim O'Brien are fictional characters, and in a story that questions the line between truth and fiction it is appropriate to question the surface value of this encounter.

Smith writes that the "sole function of this postscript is to solidify the male bond and ridicule and reject the feminine, which it does with stunning hostility" (31):

The woman's "kindly temperament and humane politics" are rendered naive and unrealistic; her sadness at the death of a baby buffalo is simplistic and sentimental; her "little tears" are diminutive, inappropriate. The narrator closes the male storytelling circle by appropriating Rat Kiley's obscene term to create his own bond with his comrade-characters and his male audience and to put distance between himself and his female reader. (31)

Farrell sees this anecdote differently, again focusing on a closer analysis of the male narrator rather than the female character the narrator portrays:

But readers of this story are supposed to see past narrator O'Brien as well, who, while obviously thoughtful and intelligent in many ways, is not immune to some of the same blindnesses as the other soldier characters. We've already seen that the narrator [O'Brien] does not acknowledge the strange disparities in Rat's letter ... Narrator O'Brien is subject to the same rage and hatred that many of his characters exhibit; he, too, is damaged by his wartime experiences. And he is not always an admirable character ... Thus, when the narrator [O'Brien] condemns the older woman at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story" as a "dumb cooze" who doesn't listen, readers should not take this sentiment to express the views of author O'Brien. (5-6)

In other words, O'Brien the author presents the misogynistic attitudes of soldiers and veterans of Vietnam because they actually exist, not because he possesses such attitudes himself or because he wishes to give them additional weight. The truth of the matter is that women were excluded from fully participating in Vietnam. In an interview with *Artful Dodge*, Tim O'Brien himself noted that "There's a rage that goes through ["How to Tell a True War Story"] that was entirely intentional, but doesn't represent my own rage necessarily, but the rage that could be the consequence of men doing all the fighting and women being excluded from it" (O'Brien qtd. in Farrell 6). O'Brien "explores rather than endorses the gender resentment depicted" here and in his other stories (Farrell 6), and justly so – it exists. Instead of reading this anecdote in "How to Tell a True War Story" as an acceptance of all things male and a rejection of all things female, as Smith views it, the author O'Brien challenges us to see past the obvious gender divide and explore the continuing impact of Vietnam on our relationships as men and women. It is no mistake that, despite the negativity in the character O'Brien's characterization of this woman, the

author O'Brien makes a point to emphasize that although "she hates war stories" (90), she keeps listening to them. She wants to understand what she cannot know.

Thus, author Tim O'Brien's "most confrontational" and challenging story (Smith 29) is not as misogynistic as it initially appears. Although Curt Lemon's sister and the woman at the reading are insulted by men who are frustrated at their lack of understanding of the war, they are not directly affected by the offensive language directed at them. They never hear it, in fact, and it is not used to overcome male powerlessness at the expense of ignorant women, as Smith asserts. Once the reader sees past the surface of the anger and chauvinism presented in "How to Tell a True War Story," it is clear that author O'Brien wants his audience to question it, not accept it. When we ask ourselves why such anger exists, and why it is often directed at women, as well as at others who do not understand war, then we can explore deeper issues of gender and war, as author O'Brien intends.

## **VI. Minor female characters: Sally and Kathleen**

In addition to the female characters that play major roles in the short stories of *The Things They Carried*, there are minor female characters that play smaller, but significant roles. Two such characters are frequently discussed by critics despite receiving less attention in the narrative than Martha or Mary Anne Bell. One is Sally, the ex-girlfriend of Norman Bowker, the main character in "Speaking of Courage"; the other is Kathleen, the teenage daughter of the fictionalized version of Tim O'Brien, portrayed in "Ambush" and "Field Trip." Both of these characters are either ignored for their brevity or misinterpreted as mere chauvinistic stereotypes by the critics who do address their presence.

"Speaking of Courage" is a post-war story which takes place on the Fourth of July – a Sunday that year – in the unnamed Iowa hometown of Norman Bowker, a soldier who fought alongside the character version of Tim O'Brien. Despite the story's title, Norman does not speak of courage. In fact, he is unable to speak to anyone in his small town, including his father, his ex-girlfriend, Sally, and his late friend, Max, because they are unwilling or unable to listen. Norman spends the entirety of the story driving his father's Chevy pick-up around the lake at the center of town, watching citizens enjoy the beautiful weather and prepare for the town's fireworks display later that evening. This story deals with the continuing theme of the inability to communicate the experience of war, and Sally is traditionally and mistakenly seen as a typical woman; she remained at home during Vietnam and therefore she must not be able to understand. As O'Brien the author indicates, however, she is never truly given a chance.

It is unclear how long Norman has been home from Vietnam, but it is clear that he feels that life in his small town has gone on without him. He has changed but the town has not, a fact in sharpest evidence on this holiday rife with tradition and patriotism: "It was Sunday and it was summer, and the town seemed pretty much the same" (O'Brien 157). Although during high school Norman "had driven around and around [the lake] with Sally Kramer, wondering if she'd want to pull into the shelter of Sunset Park," Sally is a married woman now, "and most of Norman Bowker's other friends were living in Des Moines or Sioux City, or going to school somewhere, or holding down jobs" (O'Brien 158). Like many returning soldiers in the 1960s and the 1970s, Norman is having a much harder time adjusting to post-war life, and he spends this day isolated from family and friends, "driving slowly, feeling safe inside his father's big Chevy" (O'Brien 157). On his mind as he makes twelve revolutions around the lake – three more circles than the nine circles of Dante's version of hell – is the moment during the war when Norman

believes he could have saved his friend, Kiowa, but failed, leading him to wallow in crippling guilt and lament the Silver Star he never won.

Sally appears briefly in the story, one of three people Norman would like to talk to but cannot, because "Sally was married and Max was drowned and [Norman's] father was at home watching baseball on national TV" (O'Brien 159). Sally, like Norman's life before the war, is a relic of the past and symbolic of the life he could have had if Vietnam had not intervened. The conversations Norman has with Sally – none real, all imagined by Norman himself – are mostly innocuous, reflective of Norman's desire to assimilate to post-war life:

What he should do, [Norman] thought, is stop at Sally's house and impress her with this new time-telling trick of his. They'd talk for a while, catching up on things, and then he'd say, "Well, better hit the road, it's five thirty-four," and she'd glance at her wristwatch and say, "Hey! How'd you *do* that?" and he'd give a casual shrug and tell her it was just one of those things you pick up. He'd keep it light. He wouldn't say anything about anything. "How's it being married?" he might ask, and he'd nod at whatever she answered with, and he would not say a word about how he'd almost won the Silver Star for valor. (O'Brien 160)

In this, Norman's most significant imagined conversation with Sally, he maintains a casual air and refrains from talk of war, refusing to give Sally an opportunity to respond to his stories of Vietnam. For this reason, and because Sally is not a fully fleshed-out character but rather a construct of Norman's imagination – a fictional character created by a fictional character – it is impossible to characterize Sally as a stereotypical, chauvinistic prototype of a woman in a story about war.

When Norman takes his imagined dialogues further, he places each of the three characters, Max, Sally, and his father, in the passenger seat of the pickup truck, driving with him around the lake. This time, very briefly, he engages Sally with his tale of Kiowa's death, referring to the "shit field" in which he was killed, and Sally's imagined reaction is much more stereotypical: "He imagined Sally Kramer closing her eyes. If she were here with him, in the car, she would've said, 'Stop it. I don't like that word ... you don't have to use that word.' 'Fine. What should we call it?' She would have glared at him. 'I don't know. Just stop it.'" (O'Brien 164-65). In this second fictional conversation, Sally refuses to listen to Norman's war stories. In this way, she is aligned with stereotypical female characters in war literature, those who do not want to hear about the violence in which they played no role, those who deliberately stop soldiers who wish to give voice to their experiences. However, Sally is Norman's construct, and the Sally he remembers existed before the Vietnam War took place. The audience never has the chance to meet the real Sally and learn how the war impacted her. Like Curt Lemon's sister in "How to Tell a True War Story," Sally is not given the chance to present her side of the story, nor is she given the chance to actually listen to Norman's. Immediately after this imagined dialogue, Norman notes that "this was not a story for Sally Kramer," not because she is a woman but because she is no longer in Norman's life: "She was Sally Gustafson now" (O'Brien 165). It would not be appropriate for Norman to pour his heart out to Sally because she has changed, and she is someone else's wife. In fact, Tim O'Brien uses Sally and Norman's dead friend, Max, to show the audience exactly who *should* be listening to Norman – his father. The fact that Norman's father, alive and well and juxtaposed with two impossible listeners, would rather watch baseball than hear what his emotionally fragile son has to say shocks and saddens the reader. Sally is not the intended target of our anger.

Smith's critique of Sally's portrayal in "Speaking of Courage" is more about the things we never learn about her: "Did Sally suffer through Norman's absence in Vietnam? Did she have her own traumas and losses because of the war? Such stories aren't told in the book" (22). Although it is true that Sally's story is not told – this is Norman's story, after all – the characters of Martha and Mary Anne certainly prove that O'Brien told women's stories as much as he could. Though Smith sees chauvinism in that fact that Norman "pictures more perfect dialogues with his father, 'who had his own war and now preferred silence'" (22), it is not chauvinistic to imply that Norman should be sharing his stories with his father. Norman's father is his most appropriate audience, and he's presented as the one Norman would prefer to tell his stories to, as someone who has the greatest potential to understand and console. And, as Susan Farrell points out, "Sally Gustafson in the story is *not* intended to be a real woman; she represents Norman's perceived view of women, his expectations of how they would respond to his war stories. And, as the narrator points out in a sly play on words, Norman 'knew shit. It was his specialty'" (11). Though Smith sees another misogynistic portrayal of a woman in the character of Sally, author Tim O'Brien trusts his audience to understand the character better, and to see her as a creation of Norman's imagination.

Kathleen, the daughter of the fictional version of Tim O'Brien, is similar to Sally in that she is presented as a potential audience for war stories. She appears a few times throughout the book, most notably in "Ambush" and "Field Trip." Each time, her father struggles with the appropriate way to tell her, a pre-teen girl, about his experiences in Vietnam. In "Ambush," Kathleen poses the most difficult question: because her father writes so many stories about his time in Vietnam, she figures " 'you must've killed somebody'" (O'Brien 147). O'Brien the character's immediate response is a lie – "Of course not" – though he hopes that someday

she'll ask again, so he can "tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right" (O'Brien 147). In "Field Trip," Kathleen accompanies her father on a trip back to Vietnam, twenty years after the war, "a kind of birthday present, showing her the world, offering a small piece of her father's history" (O'Brien 208). Although she "held up well" during such an exhausting trip, O'Brien the character notes that the war "was as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs" (208). Like Linda in "The Lives of the Dead," Kathleen is very young and worldly, and she represents not so much her gender as her generation, those who have grown up outside of the direct influence of the Vietnam War and therefore have a difficult time understanding it.

Lorrie Smith sees Kathleen similarly, as one who represents "a younger generation distanced from the war and all those excluded from its first-hand experience" (21), although her exclusion, of course, is not deliberate. She was born a decade after the war ended. Smith also sees Kathleen as representative of the typical misogyny and male power present in war literature: in both stories, "[t]ruth is established as relative and situational; the (male) writer maintains absolute authority over its manipulation and what story is 'right' for the daughter" (Smith 21). This is incorrect. The author Tim O'Brien, who never married and has no children, presents a fictionalized version of himself who is flummoxed by his daughter's astute questions and desire to understand Vietnam, and who is truly torn about his decision to withhold the truth from her. He is hardly a man exerting power over a woman, nor is he an adult exerting power over a child. He is, ironically, a war veteran figuratively brought to his knees by his young daughter's keen observations about war.

Lorrie Smith believes that throughout *The Things They Carried*, "Kathleen entreats her father to leave the past behind, forget about the war, get past his 'obsession'" (21). In part, it is

true, Kathleen is confused by her father's compulsion to write war stories, but she does not entreat him to forget, as her barrage of questions about the war indicates. Rather, she expresses her own desire to understand.

One morning in Saigon she'd asked what it was all about.

"This whole war," she said, "why was everybody so mad at everybody else?"

I shook my head. "They weren't mad, exactly. Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing."

"What did you want?"

"Nothing," I said. "To stay alive."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

Kathleen sighed. "Well, I don't get it. I mean, how come you were even here in the first place?"

"I don't know," I said. "Because I had to be."

"But *why*?"

I tried to find something to tell her, but finally I shrugged and said, "It's a mystery, I guess. I don't know." (O'Brien 208-209)

Contrary to Smith's analysis, Kathleen here asserts her desire to know and understand the war, not an entreaty "to leave the past behind" (Smith 21) and forget about it. Kathleen's questions, her emphasis on the word "why," are the very questions Tim O'Brien – author and character – tries to answer as he writes about the war.

O'Brien the character's responses to his daughter illustrate the difficult task of communicating war experiences to someone who was not there. Kathleen's persistence shows

that she wants her father to try anyway. Although the war is perhaps more remote to her than to most other female characters presented in the book, she wants to learn about it, flouting the idea that Smith presents that *The Things They Carried* presents an "implicit criterion of masculinity as qualifications for understanding Vietnam" (21). Kathleen is female, and she wants to know. What prevents her from knowing is her father's inability to truly share his experiences with her, and that inability stems from his ambivalent desires to protect her from the truth and teach her what he knows. Tim O'Brien the character tries to bridge the gap by bringing his daughter to Vietnam, to the very spot where Kiowa died twenty years earlier. Both he and Tim O'Brien the author do not see Kathleen's gender as a reason to keep her at home.

Thus, despite the brevity of Sally's and Kathleen's appearances in O'Brien's work, they do more to further his inclusion of women as characters and listeners. Sally points out the mistake men often made in assuming women would not, or could not, listen. Norman sees Sally as an inappropriate audience, and, because he "can't ever find any words" and "can't figure out what exactly to say" (O'Brien 179), he does not give Sally a chance to hear his story. Kathleen is just a little girl, but she expresses a desire to learn about her father's life as a soldier, and despite his attempts to share it with her, Tim O'Brien the character is unable to truly do so. Her assessment that her father is "weird" (O'Brien 209) has little to do with her desire to learn and everything to do with O'Brien the character's inability to teach, which O'Brien the author shows us is an error – a typical error which has contributed to the gender divide O'Brien attempts to bridge with this work.

## VII. Tim O'Brien and the Female Reader

One of Lorrie Smith's primary assertions in her work is that "How to Tell a True War Story" exemplifies a problem with the entirety of *The Things They Carried*: that Tim O'Brien not only denigrates the female characters he creates, but that he deliberately excludes female readers (Smith 17). In "How to Tell a True War Story," she claims, both Curt Lemon's sister and the woman at the reading represent a much larger audience of women who are unable to "read" the war stories they are told. Like Martha in "The Things They Carried" and "Love," Sally in "Speaking of Courage," and Kathleen in "Ambush" and "Field Trip," women in post-Vietnam America have refused to hear the stories that the male veterans wish to tell. Smith's assertion, however, ignores the great importance that Tim O'Brien places on women, as characters and as readers, by featuring them prominently in his stories. And, as Pamela Smiley argues in "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," the fact that his characters work so hard to make women understand illustrates that they, like real Vietnam veterans, believe that the understanding of women is important to the process of understanding war itself.

Lorrie Smith notes that the intent of her work in critiquing O'Brien in the context of female characters and readers "is not to devalue O'Brien's technical skill or emotional depth, but to account for my own discomfort as a female reader" (17). Although I cannot, and should not, eradicate or disparage Smith's personal discomfort, I can share my own, antithetical experiences in reading O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* as a female reader myself. I first came to the book as an uncomfortable, excluded female reader myself, uninterested in war literature and film that presented few, if any, remarkable female characters. Smith is correct in her analysis of most Vietnam storytelling, which summarizes the viewpoints of feminist critics such as Kali Tal and Susan Jeffords:

I agree ... that revisionist and literary productions over the past decade have restored the once-stigmatized Vietnam veteran to a position of power and status. Indeed, thanks largely to Oliver Stone, Sylvester Stallone, and Ron Kovic, veteran writers have increasingly had access to a discourse that is all too readable and familiar in our culture. The "alphabet of trauma," that is, has been encoded as a narrative of wounded American manhood that depends, for its meaning – whether tragic, ironic, or redemptive – on the positioning of women ... as others. (Smith 18)

Smiley agrees with this part of Smith's analysis as well, noting that fiction about war "is usually less concerned with women than with rituals and tests that 'make you a man'" (603). Smiley goes on to delineate the typical conventions of the war literature genre:

First is the separation from women and their "civilizing" influence. Second is the performance of masculinity according to traditional standards involving bravery, physical prowess, and virility. And third is the company of men, particularly the wizened sergeant (or some other father figure) who pronounces the young soldier "a man." (603)

It is not surprising that these stereotypes excluded female readers, including me, for decades. Although war literature has certainly had value as a part of American culture, for the most part it did not have women.

That is precisely why Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is so captivating, to men and women alike. The inclusion of richly drawn female characters like Martha, Mary Anne, and Linda is an intriguing and welcome prospect for any female reader who has been unable to see herself in other, similar pieces of literature. The very presence of women in the stories invites female readers into the reading of them; thus, O'Brien closes the gender gap and emphasizes the importance of women, both as characters and as audience. Smiley sees this inclusion of women

as the "central project" of O'Brien's work, "to make the Marthas who stayed home during the sixties and seventies playing volleyball, going to college, reading Virginia Woolf, to make such women understand their brothers, friends and lovers who went to Vietnam" (602). It is important to remember that the exclusion of women from participating in the full experiences of war was a deliberate one, only recently and partially rectified by U.S. military policy, and by including women in his work, O'Brien is attempting to include them in the experience as much as it is possible to do so.

It is true that though there are female characters in O'Brien's work, the author has not completely solved the problem of understanding the war – nor has he claimed to. There are female characters who struggle with the stories the men tell them, or try to tell them. Martha "crossed her arms" and confirmed that she "didn't understand how men could do" the things men do (O'Brien 31) in "Love." Sally closed her eyes at Norman Bowker's offensive language in "Speaking of Courage." Curt Lemon's sister never wrote back in "How to Tell a True War Story." All of this misunderstanding and miscommunication exists in the stories because it exists in life, it existed between the men who fought in Vietnam and the people they came home to – Tim O'Brien the author would have been remiss had he not addressed it. Smith believes that these examples reinforce the idea presented by O'Brien that "men at war act like men at war, and only men can write about it and understand it" (19).

Yet Smiley believes that these examples of misunderstanding between men and women prove that O'Brien sees women as the most important audience to reach through his stories: "It is not to a company of men that O'Brien's characters perform, but rather to ideal readers in the form of Lemon's sister and the woman at the reading" (603). The disappointments suffered by Rat Kiley, Norman Bowker, and the fictional Tim O'Brien when they try to communicate their

stories to women indicate the true importance of women as readers, because "when a woman listens and understands, something shifts ... Instead of the sergeant who proclaims the soldier a man, it is the ideal female reader for whom O'Brien's characters perform their masculinity" (Smiley 609). It is also true that there are men who refuse to hear the soldiers' stories, men such as Norman Bowker's father in "Speaking of Courage" and the "fatass colonel" who will "never know" (O'Brien 82-83) in "How to Tell a True War Story." O'Brien is careful to point out that this is not a problem of gender. Though women need to be educated about war more than men because of their circumstantial exclusion, they are certainly not the only ones who do not listen at times.

Another way in which Tim O'Brien bridges the divide between men and women when it comes to war is the very medium with which he shares his experiences – storytelling. Smith herself notes that storytelling is a shared experience, indicating that anyone is invited in, and she sees *The Things They Carried* as being "[a]s much about the act of writing as about the war itself:"

O'Brien's book celebrates the reconstructive power of the imagination, which gives shape, substance, and significance to slippery emotion and memory. We might even say that imagination itself – as embodied in the act of storytelling – plays the hero in this book ... O'Brien has a genius for making poetry out of such prolix abstractions, and some of the most arresting passages in the book reflect on the craft and epistemology of writing. (Smith 17)

Because storytelling is a shared experience, because imagination has the power to reconstruct and give "shape, substance, and significance," in Smith's words (17), then O'Brien's storytelling and imagination in *The Things They Carried* must, by Smith's own definition, include everyone

in its reconstruction and shaping of the Vietnam War. By making his work about the process of writing and storytelling as much as it is about war, O'Brien has found common ground with which to broaden his audience and reach women as well as men. Although war is typically a male experience, writing is not, and knowing this helps O'Brien further bridge that gap between genders. This, along with his inclusion of female characters, is why female readers like myself had a positive, welcoming experience reading O'Brien's riveting war fiction. For the first time, I approached understanding something I had never actually lived through.

### VIII. Conclusion

According to Rivkin and Ryan, the charge of feminist literary critics is to help literature by and about women in its "emergence from silence into language – to undo the silence of those who still do not speak" (769). It is now 2014, and women have been moving from the margins to the center of literature, culture, and society for years, thanks in part to their work and the work of artists and authors who present more fully realized female creations – authors like Tim O'Brien, and the women he creates in *The Things They Carried*.

Lorrie N. Smith's criticism of O'Brien's work is an attempt to further shed light on a very real problem – "a larger cultural project to rewrite the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective" (17). What she fails to recognize, however, is that O'Brien consistently invites women into the very "storytelling circle" that she believes he has excluded them from (Smith 18). In fact, the last paragraph of "Lives of the Dead," the very last paragraph of the work as a whole, is about Linda, and her impact on the character O'Brien's storytelling and imagination:

And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even 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 is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (273)

The entire story begins and ends with Linda, really. Young Tim uses his imagination to keep "dreaming Linda alive," eventually internalizing her and beginning a story that ends thirty years later after he returns from Vietnam. Linda – a female – is an integral part of the fictional O'Brien's storytelling loop; the author O'Brien reinforces her importance by returning to her in the end. O'Brien is not part of the problem Smith critiques; he is integral to its solution.

In "Dangerous Daughters," Carol Acton notes that the women who served in Vietnam and then wrote about their experiences shared pain and emotional distress similar to that experienced by male soldiers. War nurses like Vietnam War autobiographers Lynda Van Devanter and Winnie Smith

carry not only the burden of the war experience itself but also the traditional burden borne by women in wartime: mourning for the dead. This gendered position carries a

psychological cost in the reliving of traumatic events that takes the women beyond the war itself. (Acton 106)

In many ways, the major female characters portrayed by Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* participate in a process of mourning and transcendence. Martha is haunted by Vietnam, and she chooses a life of service as a missionary and nurse instead of a stereotypical life of domesticity. Mary Anne leaves herself behind, sheds her life as an innocent girl to "[cross] to the other side" (O'Brien 125) and achieve a higher form of existence in Vietnam. And Linda helps the fictional O'Brien confront the mysteries of death to such a degree that he declares, "I'll never die" (O'Brien 273). Although O'Brien recognizes the different roles played by men and women during the war, he also understands that the impact of the Vietnam War means as much to the women in these stories as it does to the men. As Acton writes of "the woman who enters the 'forbidden zone' of the male arena of war ... her war story is inseparable from the story of the men ... [t]he place she claims is with them, rather than separate from them" (106). So it is true of the women in *The Things They Carried*.

In April of 1999, O'Brien delivered the President's Lecture at Brown University, and when asked about women in his stories he reinforced the idea that women are as important to the experience of Vietnam as the men who participated in combat – "there were women in Vietnam," after all. He said of Mary Anne in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "what happens to her is pretty much what happened to us [the soldiers who fought]," and he notes that men and women "share a capacity for violence ... we're not that different." It makes sense, then, that Martha and Mary Anne, two of O'Brien's key female characters, reflect the new, non-traditional roles women began to take on with greater urgency in post-Vietnam War America. They are neither angels nor monsters; they are too complex to be categorized so easily. In writing them as

he does, O'Brien shatters the misogynistic, "narrow expectations of what a woman should be" (Farrell 9), contrary to the interpretations of Lorrie Smith, who claims that O'Brien's portrayal of women and war is "hostile to femininity." In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien turns the typical characterization of women in wartime – as blissfully unaware Donna Reed-types waiting on the home front – on its ear. He welcomes women into the experience of the Vietnam War as much as possible, by using imaginative techniques to connect with his readers. "War stories, like any good story," O'Brien noted in his lecture, "are finally about the human heart," having little to do with gender at all.

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