

A Study of Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"

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Abstract: In Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story", the author challenges readers to examine the relationship between truth and fiction in literature. The novel begins with the paradoxical statement, "This is true," which sets the tone for the entire work. Through the use of various narrative techniques, O'Brien blurs the line between truth and fiction, prompting readers to question their assumptions about the nature of storytelling. This essay will explore the construction and relationship between truth and fiction in "How to Tell a True War Story", and will discuss how O'Brien challenges traditional notions of truth and fiction in literature from the perspective of text analysis, intertextuality and Heroic Narratives.

1. Introduction

"This is true[1]."

-Tim O'Brien (1990:65)'s "How to Tell a True War Story"

The central theme of *How to Tell a True War Story* is the relationship between truth and fiction in literature. O'Brien challenges readers to question their assumptions about the nature of storytelling, and to recognize the inherent fictional nature of narration. The opening sentence of the novel, "This is true," immediately establishes a paradox that sets the tone for the entire work. The reader is forced to question what is meant by "true," and to consider the possibility that truth and fiction can coexist within a single narrative. This essay will explore the construction and relationship between truth and fiction in "How to Tell a True War Story" and will discuss how O'Brien challenges traditional notions of truth and fiction in literature from the perspective of text analysis, intertextuality and Heroic Narratives.

2. Text Analysis of "How to Tell a True War Story"

2.1. The Meaning of "This is True"

The opening sentence of the novel, "This is true," immediately establishes an aporia that sets the tone for the entire work. The novel explores the relationship between truth and fiction, and the ways in which these two seemingly opposite concepts can coexist within a single narrative.

For readers, "This is true" is a highly perplexing statement. For a fictional world that is different from the real world has not yet been constructed between the title and opening sentence. Nothing

different from real world can be noted. There is no fictional time, no fictional place, no fictional character, and no fictional plot. There is only one vague and ambiguous statement, "this is true," whose source and referent are unclear. This unfamiliar experience for readers is intriguing. Firstly, the source of this sentence is unclear. Is the author speaking as the narrator, asserting the truthfulness of the story yet to be told? Or is the author engaging in direct dialogue with the reader before the narrator even appears in the narrative? Secondly, the referent of "this" is ambiguous, leaving readers in a state of confusion. Is it affirming the truthfulness of the narrative itself, or is it affirming the certainty of a story yet to be told? All of these uncertain possibilities make readers not easy to find out the truth and also escalate interest and tension while readers' reading. It also shapes the readers' position which will be discussed later in this paper.

2.2. General Analyzing of Truth and Fiction in Literature

One of the fundamental challenges of reading a work of fiction is that readers want to immerse themselves in a fictional world. This immersion requires a certain suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader, and it is this suspension of disbelief that creates a preconceived stance -- the narrative is assumed to be true. This assumption is based on the idea that the narrative is presented as if it were true, and that the events and characters within the narrative are presented in a way that is consistent with reality. This assumption is also reinforced by the fact that the narrative is presented in a linear, chronological format, which gives the impression that the events are unfolding in real time.

However, the fictional nature of narrative means that one or more worlds created in the narrative need to be different from the real world. This difference can take many forms, including differences in time, place, character, plot, dialogue, and so on. These differences are what create the fictional world of the narrative, and they are what allow the reader to experience the narrative as something separate from reality. In other words, the fictional world of the narrative is created by the differences between the narrative and the real world.

For a work of fiction, the fiction begins at the conception stage. O'Brien's story challenges this binary opposition between fiction and reality by blurring the lines between the two. The opening sentence affirms the truth of something, yet the story is clearly a work of fiction. The author creates a world, characters, and events that are not part of the real world. But in O'Brien's case, after the reader has read the opening sentence, "this is true," they are still not placed in a fictional situation. Because the opening sentence gives no fictional element, no fictional time, place, character, plot, dialogue. In the space between the title and the opening sentence, there is nothing different from the real world to make up a fictional world, only an unattributed statement, "this is true," a pale affirmation of the truth of something, a world, or a narrative. So, the reader is not in fictional situations now, and they are certainly not in the real world, and O'Brien creates a shared space between the title and the opening sentence where truth and fiction can coexist.

This shared space is what allows O'Brien to explore the relationship between truth and fiction in a unique way. The reader cannot continue to maintain the predetermined reading position that the narrative is assumed to be true. Because "this is true" reminds them that, in the absence of any other information between the title and the opening sentence, if the world in the narrative is real, then that world is no different from the real world. The fictitious narrative affirms its own truth, but makes the subject who assumes it to be true aware of its fiction. "O'Brien himself, who claims to have been unable to even finish *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and insists, instead, that his text draws clear boundaries between fact and fiction[2] (Donovan 2005)." Although O'Brien claims this, we must admit that the fictional nature of literature is always an aporia, regardless of the author or work from any period. "Literature is generally regarded as fictitious writing, and, indeed, the very term fiction implies that the words on the printed page are not meant to denote any given reality in the empirical

world, but are to represent something which is not given. For this reason ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ have always been classified as pure opposites, and so a good deal of confusion arises when-one seeks to define the ‘reality’ of literature[3] (Iser 1978) .”

The relationship between truth and fiction in literature is a complex one that has long fascinated literary theorists. One approach to this relationship is the idea of subjective truth, which suggests that truth is not an objective, absolute fact but rather a matter of interpretation and perspective. This idea is particularly relevant in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," where the narrator emphasizes that a true war story cannot be told objectively and that different people will have different versions of the same story. The story challenges traditional notions of truth by showing how individuals can create their own truth through the act of storytelling. By blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, the story raises important questions about the nature of truth and the role of literature in shaping our understanding of reality. Ultimately, Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" highlights the power of storytelling to shape our perception of the world and calls into question the very idea of objective truth.

2.3. Reader’s Position in Text

The reader's attention, which should be immersed in the fictional plot, is diverted to the ambiguous sources of the narrative and the unclear signification of "this." This shift in attention is gradual, eventually leading the reader to O'Brien's ultimate concern – the inherent fictional nature of narration. Although this work of fiction is called "How to Tell a True War Story," in reality, O'Brien is telling readers how to read "a true war story." Due to the inherent fictional nature of narration, the element of fiction is always present in the process of "reproducing" a narrative. The narrator cannot tell the listener what is "real," and the narrator's continued emphasis on the truthfulness of their narration will only make the listener more skeptical. Readers can only decide on their own about what is going on in the story and they have their own choice to make, no matter what the narrative said about. O'Brien is well aware of this, and in order to make readers aware of the fictional nature of narration, he uses techniques such as self-referencing, nested storytelling, and creating paradoxes, prompting readers to notice their own reading behavior and the confusion or opposition between fiction and reality, and treating his own work as the first counter example. These skills make readers enjoying reasoning the plot on their own. For them it will be a fun journey to partly participate in the story instead of just took whatever the narrative offered to them. For readers, if they found out it was not always true what the narrative said, they will be careful when they read and also they will try to find other proofs to support their suspect about the plot and the narrator. When readers begin to read the opening sentence as an affirmation of the truthfulness of narration, the sense of truthfulness dissipates amidst the recognized words and comprehended sentence. Thus, the truth of the inherent fictional nature of narration is better expressed through fiction. “O’Brien takes up the puzzle of how fiction can refer to both invented and actual people and places, and, more importantly, how avowedly ‘false’ entities might evoke deeper awareness of truth in readers[4] (Young 18).”

Between the title and the opening sentence, the author effectively constructs a shared space where the dimension of the 'story world' (in which the fictitious nature of narration is left unaddressed) coexists with the metanarrative dimension (in which the fictitious nature of narration is bluntly pointed out). This shared space continues to exist throughout the subsequent narratives and 'stories within stories' in the novel, even through multiple revisions after its publication.

2.4. The Role of Memory in Shaping Truth and Fiction

Another angle to consider when analyzing "How to Tell a True War Story" is the role of memory in shaping truth and fiction. O'Brien repeatedly emphasizes the subjective nature of memory and how

different people can remember the same event in vastly different ways. This creates ambiguity and uncertainty, as readers are left to question which version of events is "true." Furthermore, O'Brien's exploration of memory in the context of war highlights the complex relationship between truth and fiction. Memories cannot be fully trusted, while they can be a source of truth, they can also be distorted or embellished over time. This is also true for readers who have read different versions of this fictional story. When recalling different versions with varying story lines and specific details, readers' memories become blurry and distorted. O'Brien demonstrates how storytelling can be a mean of navigating this ambiguity and processing trauma. Through storytelling, the soldiers are able to reconcile the competing truths of their experiences and create meaning from their memories.

3. Intertextuality in "How to Tell a True War Story"

3.1. Intertextuality in General

A Chinese scholar Wang Liya (2008:4) draws on Hofstadter's analysis of M.C. Escher's artwork 'Drawing Hands' to explain the relationship between truth and fiction in this novel. The narrator frequently suspends the 'story time', stepping out to discuss the story's characters and events with the reader, even reminding the reader of the fictionality of the story. This metanarrative technique, reminiscent of 'metafiction', imbues the work with a paradoxical structure of fiction and reality, aiming to remind the reader that 'truth' and 'fiction' are two intertwined aspects of the same story, shaped by the author's narration and the reader's interpretation[5]. The structure of 'truth' and 'fiction' here resembles the famous artwork 'Drawing Hands' by M.C. Escher: the relationship between the hands in the drawing can be described as an equal and interchangeable 'drawing' and 'being drawn' relationship, while at the same time, the 'hand' within the 'drawing' and the 'hand' outside of the 'drawing' form another equal and interchangeable relationship.

In literary theory, the concept of intertextuality highlights the interconnectedness of different artistic forms. Drawing on this theoretical framework, paintings can serve as a valuable tool for interpreting literature, offering fresh and illuminating perspectives when compared to literary works. Each painting used in comparison brings a unique viewpoint, enriching our understanding of the literary work and expanding our interpretive horizons. Wang Liya's application of "Drawing Hands" and Hofstadter's analysis of it, as shown above, provided insights into the interplay between reality and fiction in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story."

By further comparing "How to Tell a True War Story" with René Magritte's "This is Not A Pipe" (Ceci n'est pas une pipe), we can unlock a novel perspective on the text, shedding light on the complex relationship between truth, fiction, and narrative structure within the literary work.

3.2. Comparative Analysis between Two Works

René Magritte's painting "This Is Not a Pipe" is a famous surrealist work that challenges the viewer's perception of reality and representation. The painting depicts a realistic representation of a pipe, but underneath the image, the French phrase "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe) is written in cursive.

Magritte created several versions of the painting, including a black and white lithograph, an oil painting with a green apple in front of the pipe, and a version with a red apple. Each version of the painting explores different aspects of the relationship between language, representation, and reality. The astonishing similarity is that O'Brien's work has also undergone numerous revisions, with many of the changes related to meta-narrative elements. O'Brien was particularly interested in exploring the ways in which storytelling and narrative construction can affect our understanding of truth and reality, and he used the revisions to refine and clarify these themes. The story was first published in 1987 in

The Iowa Review, and it underwent significant revisions before it was included in the 1990 collection "The Things They Carried." O'Brien has stated in interviews that he revised the story extensively, even after it had been accepted for publication, in order to get it just right. One of the most significant changes O'Brien made was to the title of the story. It was originally titled "How to Write a True War Story", but O'Brien changed it to "How to Tell a True War Story" because he felt that "telling" a story was more appropriate than "writing" it. Rene Magritte and Tim O'Brien both modify their works and thematic orientations through continuous revisions, in order to bring them closer to the two central ideas of "the fictional nature of representation (whether it is imitation in painting or narration in literature)" and "the arbitrariness of linguistic reference".

In his book *The Order of Things*, philosopher Michel Foucault discusses Magritte's painting and its significance in relation to his theories of language and representation. Foucault (1994:290) argues that the painting reveals the arbitrariness of language and representation, highlighting the fact that a representation of something is not the same as the thing itself[6]. He suggests that Magritte's painting demonstrates how language constructs our perception of reality and how the representation of something can become more real to us than the thing itself[6]. "This Is Not a Pipe" is a thought-provoking work of art that challenges traditional notions of representation and reality.

If we were to compare "How to tell a true war story" to Rene's painting "This Is Not a Pipe," we could say that the "fictitious nature of narration" is equivalent to the pipe in the painting, and the opening sentence "this is true" is akin to the text underneath the pipe which reads "this is not a pipe." In both works, the creators employ subversive techniques that challenge our assumptions about the nature of representation and language. By blurring the lines between truth and fiction, O'Brien invites readers to consider the subjective nature of reality and the power of storytelling to shape our understanding of the world. Similarly, Rene's painting asks us to question the ways in which images can deceive us and calls into question the very act of representation itself. In both cases, the works challenge us to engage with the complexities of meaning-making and the limits of language, leaving us with more questions than answers.

In addition, there are similarities between these masterpieces. Both works challenge the idea of a fixed reality and instead emphasize the subjectivity of perception and interpretation. René Magritte's painting denies the viewer's immediate recognition of the object depicted - a pipe - by contradicting it with the statement "this is not a pipe." Similarly, Tim O'Brien's story insists on the truthfulness of an account while simultaneously questioning the very nature of truth in storytelling. In both cases, the artists seek to subvert the viewer's expectations and engage them in an act of critical thinking. They do this by highlighting the arbitrary nature of signification and the creative possibilities of representation. By emphasizing the gap between signifier and signified, Magritte and O'Brien encourage their audiences to question the role of language and representation in shaping our understanding of reality. Moreover, the works are similar in their use of metafictional techniques. Both draw attention to their own status as constructed narratives and play with the conventions of storytelling. Magritte's painting self-consciously references the history of painting and the tradition of still life while simultaneously undermining it. Similarly, O'Brien's story draws on the conventions of war literature but destabilizes them through its emphasis on the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of experience. Overall, "How to Tell a True War Story" and "This Is Not a Pipe" are similar in their philosophical implications and their use of metafictional techniques to challenge traditional modes of representation. They both raise important questions about the nature of truth, perception, and representation and invite their audiences to engage in a critical rethinking of these concepts.

4. Heroic Narratives in How to Tell a True War Story

4.1. Lemon-“a real soldier’s soldier”

There is another intriguing aspect in this fictional work, regarding the content of fiction. One of the main character Bob Kiley wrote a fabricated letter about Curt Lemon, his closest friend and witness to his death. In the letter, Bob describes Lemon as “a real soldier’s soldier,” even though both Bob and Lemon were just young boys who had never experienced actual combat. Later in the story, there is a passage that can be interpreted as a critique of the letter: “if a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.” Is Bob’s letter not part of this “very old and terrible lie”? He praises Lemon for qualities he doesn’t possess and deliberately creates a heroic image while Lemon just a normal young guy who has flaws also.

True war stories don't necessarily have to be about heroism or about pain, chaos, death, and destruction. O’Brien’s emphasizes that war is also a mystery and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing for love. True war stories don't need to be strictly factual or generalized. War is chaotic and disorderly, and in his view, there is a conflict between heroic narratives and true war stories. Heroic narratives often depict soldiers as brave, strong, loyal, and fearless heroes whose actions and sacrifices are for the protection of their country and freedom. However, in war, soldiers often are not heroes; they are even just children. They may feel fear, despair, anger, and loneliness. They may make mistakes, failure, or be forced to make terrible choices. Therefore, in some cases, heroic narratives cannot reflect the true emotional and factual aspects of soldier stories. Readers need to consider all factors mentioned below to appreciate the war story. They are not all about perfect positive heroes.

4.2. Bob Kiley- "Rat"

Heroic narratives emphasize personal heroism, national or political significance, provide emotional satisfaction, and boost morale. However, this narrative model may ignore soldiers’ personal experiences and feelings, even possibly obscuring the true state of war or even distorting the facts. The phrase “a very old and terrible lie” in the text can be seen as a critique of heroic war narratives. Heroic narratives often create a portrayal of brave soldiers, hoping to inspire people in war. But they often fail to tell the real war stories of “things you are afraid to do, love, memory, sorrow, sisters who never write back and people who never listen.” In O’Brien's view, heroic narratives betray the essence of “true war stories.” Perhaps, it's the reason why Bob Kiley was called "Rat" - a betrayer in a "true war story."

The phrase "a very old and terrible lie" in the text can be seen as a criticism of heroic narratives in war. Heroic narratives often deliberately create images of brave soldiers to inspire people during the war. However, these narratives often cannot tell the real story of the war, failing to describe the "things you afraid to do, love, memory, sorrow, sisters who never write back and people who never listen." From O'Brien's perspective, heroic narratives betray the "true war story." Perhaps that is why Bob Kiley was referred to as "rat," a betrayer of the "true war story."

5. Conclusion

“You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever[1].”

-Tim O’Brien (1990:73)’s “How to Tell a True War Story”

Tim O'Brien's “How to Tell a True War Story” challenges traditional notions of truth and fiction

in literature. Through the use of various narrative techniques, O'Brien blurs the line between truth and fiction, prompting readers to question their assumptions about the nature of storytelling. The novel explores the relationship between truth and fiction, and the ways in which these two seemingly opposite concepts can coexist within a single narrative. By creating a shared space between truth and fiction, O'Brien is able to explore the inherent fictional nature of narration and to prompt readers to recognize the element of fiction in all narratives. "How to Tell a True War Story" is a unique literary work that challenges readers to examine their assumptions about the nature of truth and fiction, and to read with suspicion.

After reading and analyzing this work, we can see that fiction and reality are not completely opposed and can coexist. Moreover, using vague and conceptual language to explore "what is true" in literary texts that are inherently fictional only leads to paradoxical outcomes.

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