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# The Beauty of Death (2011)

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## The Beauty of Death

*By Mohammad Albalooshi*

Death is an inevitable part of human life; all of us will eventually experience it. *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien is a work of fiction about an American platoon during the Vietnam War, but throughout the book, the narrator keeps insisting that the book is real, only to contradict himself after a few pages. O'Brien does not do that because he is just an eccentric writer, but he is trying to make us believe these fictional characters' deaths and hardships are real, in order to convey a message about how there is beauty in death and how focusing on it could help us cope with our grief.

O'Brien uses an unusual style that consists of first person, third person and flashbacks to tell the story. One element that is consistent throughout the book is how he mentions the characters that are about to die without giving details, only to eventually dedicate entire chapters to their deaths. For example, the Vietcong soldier that the narrator kills in the chapter "The Man I Killed" is an example of this style of writing. He does not give any details about how the man died in this chapter. In fact, the chapter starts with the highly detailed description of the body: "His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone" (*Things* 118). However, only one side of the man's face is gone and the other still reflects the man's beauty; the narrator says: "Clean hair, clean fingernails... Smooth face" (*Things* 119). When the narrator is giving the description of the body, he also sees a butterfly on the man, "There was a butterfly on his chin... the butterfly was making its way along the young man's forehead" (*Things* 120-121). Why does the narrator keep talking about the butterfly? Why does the young man, after being killed by a grenade, still seems to have a handsome face on one side, while the other side is nothing but blood and gore? This passage enables one to see the beauty in all of this. Even in the middle of a war, life still goes on. Butterflies are flying; the sun is shining through the dense Vietnamese forests. The environment does not change as it does in so many other novels and movies, where characters die in a dark place or under the rain. That is because death does not change anything really. We may mourn the dead and suffer grief, but in the end, we will have to move on. We will have to continue to live our life enduring the grief, sorrow, pain and anger that death brings with it, because that is part of our life. It is a part of being human.

Remembering something that happened a long time ago and is as intense as killing a man could be difficult. That is why in the chapter "The Man I Killed," the narrator does not speak, and he just drifts in his own memories, remembering the body and the pain and regret he felt. But after reconstructing his memories, he can talk about how he killed the man in the next chapter

“Ambush”; and we finally get to see how the narrator used a grenade to kill the man. However, even here the focus on beauty without the total negligence of the ugliness of war is still visible. The narrator describes the scenery: “The night was foggy and hot... Very gradually, in tiny slivers, dawn began to break through the fog” (*Things* 126). He cannot totally forget the ugliness of a hot night in the forest, but he chooses to concentrate more on describing the dawn and how beautiful it was for sunrays to pierce through the fog. Even though the narrator is about to describe how he killed a man, he still feels the need to describe and focus on the beauty of nature that surrounds him, because if he does not, then the images of how gruesome the body was would be more clear for him. Thus, his guilt will increase. He is trying to counteract the images of blood and gore, by focusing more on the beauty that surrounds him.

Another character who dies a horrible death, but where the narrator decides to focus on the beauty of it, is Curt Lemon. Lemon dies after stepping on a mine and his body is blown up by it. The narrator describes how Lemon’s body was after his death: “I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines, the gore was horrible” (*Things* 79). Indeed, being blown apart by a mine would not be beautiful. However, before the narrator mentions the gore, he mentions the beautiful scenery that surrounds him, the trees, the river and the sunrays piercing through the trees: “When he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms” (*Things* 67). An important word here is “almost.” The narrator still cannot accept that Lemon’s death was not horrible, but he cannot forget the beauty that accompanied his death. He sees Lemon’s being blown up by a mine to be a beautiful death, not because he likes death, but because there really is beauty in this powerful experience. He even calls the entire war beautiful. However, why does he contradict himself by saying war is hell? He explains that: “The truths are contradictory. War is grotesque, but in truth, war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat” (*Things* 77).

Another part of the beauty of witnessing death is that it makes us feel alive. It makes us remember how fragile we really are and how we could die in any moment. Soldiers feel this distinctly: “After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil, everything” (*Things* 77). That is why the narrator focuses on how swiftly Ted Lavender dies; to remind us how death could be fast, but it also could be beautiful. The narrator says about Lavender, “I remember how peaceful his eyes were.... We could almost see his dreamy blue eyes. We could almost hear him” (*Things* 219).

Throughout reading *The Things They Carried*, a question arises to readers. Why did O’Brien not write about his own experience in Vietnam and instead insist that this work of fiction is real? Surely, he could convey his message better if he talked about real events that he experienced during the war. There are multiple reasons for that. One of them is that writing is O’Brien’s way of healing himself. It is his drug, his way of coping with the grief and regret he has. He writes fiction and tries to focus on the beauty of death in order to lie to himself, to revive the dead in his mind; he says: “In a story I can revive. In a story, miracles can happen” (*Things*

224). He also says at the end: “I realize it is as Tim is trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (*Things* 233).

It may be hard for a person to imagine that there is beauty in death, but that is one of the messages that the text implies. By focusing more on the beauty, we can lessen our grief. If a loved one dies of a terrible accident, one does not think about how bloody his body may have been, but one instead tries to remember how beautiful that person was. In addition, death could actually be beautiful because it makes us appreciate life. And if one like the narrator is able to create an imaginary world with one’s deceased loved ones, it could be beautiful because the dead are still with us, but in a better world. “As if I am gazing into another world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all” (*Things* 233).

#### Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. Print.