

POSTMODERN FICTION AS A WAY OF REEVALUATING THE CHALLENGES OF THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE WAR ON TERROR

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ABSTRACT: Through the postmodern texts *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box me up and Ship me Home* (1975), by Tim O'Brien, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September" (2001), by Don DeLillo, and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), by Jonathan Safran Foer, this paper discusses how these authors review History in their fictional writings, disclosing other perspectives to examine the past.

Keywords: Tim O'Brien; Don DeLillo; Jonathan Safran Foer; Literature and History; Postmodern American Fiction; Wars.

The relationship between Literature and History is a crucial aspect to be debated in postmodern American fiction. The notion that History is also "a form of fiction" (WHITE, 1985, p. 122) has brought up the question related to "truth" in official historical accounts. Literature, then, offers an advantageous opportunity to discuss and present new approaches to past events, from a different standpoint.

Through their writings, the authors Don DeLillo, Tim O'Brien and Jonathan Safran Foer show their concern towards the reviewing of U.S. History. In a world marked by uncertainties, it is of supreme importance trying to rethink some of the "truths" that were imposed on people throughout the years.

What is "truth"? Will we ever know it? Postmodern fiction has brought up this issue in a very intense manner, and writers have given multiple perspectives to official History, once regarded as total, closed and definite, by bringing the voices of groups who were not heard before, whose histories were ignored. In this sense, the novels to which the concept of "historiographic metafiction" (HUTCHEON, 1988, 1993) can be applied, have allowed the reader to revisit a certain occurrence with a broader view. As Linda Hutcheon states:

[...] as we have been seeing in historiographic metafiction as well, we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men. (1993, p.66)

The theorist also observes that there is not only one truth, but "truths in the plural" (1988, p.109), the authors studied in this paper intend to make their readers conscious of this state of affairs.

In order to put the idea of the existence of one truth into question, the techniques used by DeLillo, O'Brien and Foer produce challenging texts to be

analyzed. There is a mixture of voices, of points of view, and the innovations present in the graphic experimentations are astounding. The narrative is rapid in movement, in an apparent state of confusion. This leads the reader to a very active attitude towards the texts, making the necessary connections to follow the development of the story and construct meaning(s).

Tim O'Brien is a veteran of the Vietnam War and wrote books about the event, but through the perspective of the soldiers, those who were really walking in the mud, having to deal with all sorts of troubles without being able to escape from the traps prepared by the Viet Congs. This part of the paper focuses on *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box me up and Ship me Home*, published in 1975, and aims at presenting some of the issues addressed by O'Brien that show the lack of purpose in that war.

Despite the fact that Tobey Herzog (2000) does regard *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as an autobiography, I have decided not to give this approach to my study, but to examine it as a revision of that historical period. Thus, the "I" that appears in the narrative is a fictional narrator and character called O'Brien, who was drafted in 1968. Tobey Herzog (2000, p. 900), when analyzing the narrator in O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, inquires whether some of the stories told in the book are "based on the war experiences of soldier O'Brien or on war stories he heard in Vietnam." Moreover, Herzog (2000, p. 900) points out that although Tim O'Brien denies being the narrator of the book, readers are curious to know why he used "the Tim O'Brien name for his narrator." The author's answer is that he was writing the book and "found his name appearing." Those issues can also be applied to *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, since the texture of the book is an interweaving of fact and fiction.

As the narrative unfolds, readers get to know the contradictions of the war. The various short stories that form the book expose how that war was incorrectly judged. The narrator points out that: "The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (1999, p.18)

What was right? What was wrong? The notions of good and evil are always present in the narrative ("I declared the war evil," 1999, p. 20), but it becomes clear to the narrator that he has no choice other than going to Vietnam. A decision such as fleeing to Canada, would make him be considered a coward by the people of his town,

who hardly gave any thought about why Americans were in Vietnam. According to their point of view, the explanation was plain and unquestionable: the U.S. had to fight the evil communists. Thus, there is no question about to what extent did people really understand the actual reasons for the troops to be in Vietnam.

The creation of “the truth,” “the right thing to do,” is based upon reasons that may not be plausible. Whether the war was right or wrong, it would not make any difference to those people, as readers learn in the passages related to the town where the first-person narrator lived. He explains that he grew up between wars, belonging, therefore, to the group of baby-boomers. His town was a place for “wage earners today—not very spirited people, not very thoughtful people” (1999, p.13), and in that place there was no argument against the Second World War: “Nothing to do with causes or reason; the war was right, they muttered, and had to be fought” (1999, p.13).

As far as Vietnam was concerned, their reaction could not be different, and what causes alarm is the situation that by refusing to think about the causes of the war, people simply accepted the version given by the government and the military. The soldiers had to face a different reality, though.

According to Kaplan,

First the United States decided what constituted good and evil, right and wrong, civilized and uncivilized, freedom and oppression for Vietnam, according to American standards; [...] For the U.S. military and government, the Vietnam that they had in effect invented became fact. For the soldiers that the government then sent there however, the facts that their government had created about who was the enemy, what were the issues, and how the war was to be won were quickly overshadowed by a world of uncertainty. (1993, p. 43)

The moments of horror that the soldiers had to go through make the reader think about what heroism is. Is it an act of heroism going to a war and dying? Before leaving for Vietnam, the narrator O’Brien heard contrasting views on the matter: “‘No war is worth losing your life for,’ a college acquaintance used to argue. [...] But others argued that no war is worth losing your country for [...] (1999, p.21). Should those drafted defend the country, even though they think the war is wrong?

He goes to Vietnam and describes scenes from his arrival there (“First there is some mist. Then, when the plane begins its descent, there are pale gray mountains.” 1999, p. 69) up to the moment when he gets back to the United States. Throughout the book, the narrator reveals his suffering, his agony. The soldiers had to walk in the

rain, in the forests, blowing up tunnels, waiting for the enemy to appear suddenly. Some died in unbelievable ways. In one passage, when they bombed shelters, one piece of clay sliced off a man's nose and he died; others hit mines and their lives are over; others lose their legs.

To show their power (or insanity?), American soldiers are cruel to civilians, by making old men prisoners and beating them, by provoking massacres, as it had happened in My Lai one year before O'Brien was there, by mistreating a blind old man. This blind old farmer was helping soldiers to shower with water from his well, but one of the soldiers flushed milk in the man's face and it sprayed into his cataracts. There was a mixture of milk and blood that he tried to reach by moving his tongue. Then, he continued to catch water from the well with a bucket to shower the other soldier. None of these happenings make evident any courage, but only cowardice; moreover, they disclose one of the most dangerous problems they had in Vietnam, that is, lack of direction, of management, of purpose. At a certain moment, the soldiers did not know what they were in Vietnam for, since innocent civilians were being killed.

When speaking about the massacre in My Lai, Major Callicles points out that the bomber pilot knows he is going to kill civilians, even though he may not see them: "so he just flies out and drops his load and flies back, gets a beer, and sees a movie" (1999, 194). It seems simple, but, in reality, this pilot will never forget that he caused the deaths of so many people who had not done anything wrong. It is not only a matter of war and peace, of right or wrong. It is a moral question that is addressed in this narrative. As Hayden White (1987, p. 25) queries, "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?"

History has to be debated in the novel, and one of these moments happens when O'Brien engages in a discussion with Chaplain Edwards, who is also an officer, a Captain. In this dialogue on war and faith, the reader starts asking himself whose side of the wars is portrayed in the official reports. It is obvious that O'Brien and Edwards have opposing views, as if they had read different versions of the facts, such as the Spanish-American war. According to the Captain, the Lord had moved President McKinley to go to that war, which for O'Brien, is "McKinley's history," and argues that wars are decided in "man's intellect" (1999, p.59).

O'Brien also explains that he could not see any evidence that "the lives being lost, the children napalmed and everything" would be "worth preventing a change

from Thieu to Ho Chi Minh” (1999, p. 60). Captain Edwards states that going to Vietnam is ““a fine, heroic moment for American soldiers”” (1999, p. 60). This idea of heroism was not sufficiently strong to convince O’Brien that the combat in Vietnam was right. The real situation is that O’Brien could not find reasons to support that war. He could understand people fighting Hitler, they had certain causes for that; however, in his opinion, the conflict in Vietnam was “a war fought for uncertain reasons” (1999, p. 138). The topic developed throughout the book shows that the Vietnam War was an enormous mistake.

Tim O’Brien is known for his journalistic-fictional style, being compared to Ernest Hemingway, since their descriptions, even the most violent ones, do not arouse high emotions. In the book, Private O’Brien remarks that Hemingway and Pyle wrote about war, without discussing whether it was right or wrong. He remembers one story by Hemingway about the Second World War, and is not able to understand the fact that “he did not care to talk about the thoughts those men must have had” (1999, p. 93). However, the objective Tim O’Brien has with his writings *is* to show the soldiers’ point of view: their suffering, anguish, and the sequels, either physical or psychological, or even both, that they have to carry for the rest of their lives.

Private O’Brien gets a job as a typist in battalion headquarters and finally leaves for the United States. He had decided “to write about the army,” (1999, p. 93), after his time in Vietnam was over. This way, he would be able to reveal the cruelty of wars. When the narrator got back to his country, he could take his uniform off on the plane. However, he did not have “civilian shoes,” and states that “It’s impossible to go home barefoot” (1999, p. 209). By not going home barefoot, it becomes clear that he will not be able to be the same man he was before going to Vietnam; he will always carry the marks of the war, and the image that he had of his own land had changed. Hence, he knew that it was dangerous to walk barefoot on that soil.

By telling war stories, O’Brien can review those moments, making people rethink the purposes of violent acts, and discuss whether the country should fight a war or not, at the expense of innocent lives. “Now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth” (1999, p.23). The message is that we will never know the whole truth. All we have is what really happened and what could have happened. The truth is what the reader believes it to be. Consequently, there is never a closure.

After September 11, another war began: the “war on terror,” which led to the pre-emptive war against Iraq. May this conflict become a tragic repetition of the Vietnam War?

In order to discuss the 9/11 terrorist attacks, two texts are going to be approached: “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” (2001), by Don DeLillo, and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), by Jonathan Safran Foer.

In his text, DeLillo (2001, p. 33) argues that “Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over the years, only now becoming inescapable.” DeLillo is an author who had realized that the environment for terror had been present in America for a long time. Since the 1970s, DeLillo had addressed this issue in his texts, and on 9/11 it became a catastrophic reality.

Astonishingly, the terrorist attacked a way of living in which he had taken part: “Years here, waiting, taking flying lessons, making the routine gestures of community and home, the credit card, the bank account, the post-office box” (2001, p.34). Even after living in this environment, the terrorist did not change his mind. He had an objective, he was aware of what he wanted to destroy, since: “He knows who we are and what we mean in the world—an idea, a righteous fever in the brain” (2001, p. 34). As Marco Abel states,

Thus, DeLillo’s narrative intimates, the dialectic of recognition that permeates public debates of 9/11 does not hold as an explanatory apparatus, because the other does not hold as an explanatory apparatus, because the other does not even acknowledge—is not capable of acknowledging—our self. The other bypasses us. (2003, p. 1242)

DeLillo states that “Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists” (2001, p. 33). Those men moved violently against U.S. modernity, without a clear understanding of American society.

In this text, DeLillo presents some reasons for the anger of those terrorists and their attitude towards the United States: “We are rich, privileged, and strong, but they are willing to die” (2001, p. 34). Those men do believe that they are going to paradise, since they are fighting for a cause, that is, to combat the infidels (in this case, non-Muslims).

If in the past communism was terrifying, now terror has other agents, and the opposition “Us and Them” still exists: “The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term “Us and Them” has never been so striking, at either end” (2001, p. 34).

The narrator depicts the scene in which there are photographs of missing people and the objects lost in the ruins of the towers: “The cell phones, the lost shoes [...] status reports, résumés, insurance forms” (2001, p. 35).

This narrative in essay form is suddenly interrupted and changes completely to a fictional style in order to address the stories of Karen and Marc, affected by the tragedy. Marc says that ““Something is happening”” (2001, p. 36). Cell phones did not work, there was ash everywhere, and people were running in the street. Karen thought that smoke was going to kill them and Marc thought that the crush of buildings were the real danger.

In this section, the point of view changes constantly to show that people were trying to understand that occurrence, and what could happen to them: “Mark came back out to the corridor. I think we *might* die, he told himself, hedging his sense of what would happen next.”; “When the second tower fell, my heart fell with it. I called Marc, who is my nephew, on his cordless” (2001, p.37).

When they left the building, “They came out into a world of ash and near night” (2001, p.37). This is the moment that allows the reader to verify that there is destruction and a total state of confusion. People found shelter at Pace University and when they were offered food, somebody said ““I don’t want cheese on that.””; “I like it better not so cooked” (2001, p.37). It is a signal that they were willing to lead their normal lives again.

This whole section works as if a director of a movie wanted to show a quick scene of the tragedy and then the reader is taken back to the previous form of narrative, to continue the discussion on the reasons for the attacks. There is the technological advancement of the United States, a nation that “is comfortable with the future” (2001, p. 39), in opposition to those terrorists, “who want to bring back the past” (2001, p. 34).

Undoubtedly, there is the question on how terrorists can kill innocent civilians in the name of a God who will send them to paradise. Some people did not even think that they were watching a real fact on TV: “It was bright and totalizing, and some of us said it was unreal” (2001, p. 38). However, the world had to face the shocking reality that the Twin Towers fell and there was the terror of “People falling from the

towers hand in hand” (2001, p. 39). What is left is language, this powerful instrument, and the writer uses it to try to realize why that happened, imagine all the suffering those people went through and describe his view on the matter.

In spite of September 11, New York continues to be the destination of immigrants from all over the world, and there they lead their lives, practicing their religions (as the narrator saw an Islamic woman on a prayer rug on Canal Street, one month before the attacks), speaking their mother tongues, bringing their contribution to the culture of the United States. The skyline in New York has changed, but America has not.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s book is about 9/11. The main character Oskar, whose father died in the attack to the World Trade Center, finds a key in an envelope in his father’s closet, in the middle of the pieces of a vase he had broken. On the back of the envelope, there is the word “Black,” and he decides to find the right lock for that key. In a city like New York, he calculates that it would take him about “three years to go through all of them [the locks]” (2005, p. 51).

Oskar’s journey is what causes the novel to move forward. While the reader gets to know characters and the aftermath of 9/11, the five messages his father, Thomas Schell, left in the answering machine when the terrorist act happened, are shown. They are spread on the novel, on pages 14, 69, 168, 207, 280. In these messages, it is possible to verify that the stages go from the moment when people had no idea of what was going on (“*Listen, something’s happened*” [message #1, p.14]), to the hopes of that the firemen would be able to rescue them (“*I’ll call again in a few minutes. Hopefully the firemen will be. Up here by then.*” [message #2, p.69]), their trying to escape through the roof (“*I’m underneath a table. Hello? Sorry. I have a wet napkin wrapped around my face. [...] People are getting crazy. There’s a helicopter circling around, and. I think we’re going to go up onto the roof.*” [message # 4, p.207]), up to the moment when he is about to die:

MESSAGE FIVE.

10:04 A.M. IT’S DA S DAD. HEL S DAD. KNOW IF [...]
SORRY HEAR ME MUCH
HAPPENS, REMEMBER — (2005, p.280).

The narrative technique conveys all the anguish of the final moments of those people's lives. A mixture of fear and dread which pervades the talking and it all starts with the "something is happening" up to the end of all hopes. Thomas is probably trying to say how much he loves his family, a last message of encouragement whatever happens. Schell's family buried an empty coffin. The narrative shows his life coming to an end without any palpable reason

Experimentation with language is an outstanding feature in the book and, through an innovative way of writing, Foer intermingles narrative, photos of diverse sources, blank pages, pages with only one sentence, pages painted with different colors, italics, block letters, and pages that the reader cannot read anything, because they seem to have been overtyped. This fragmentation challenges the reader to try to understand who is speaking and make connections between the pictures and the narrative.

One of the most striking sequence of photos is the ones in which there is a person jumping out of the window of the WTC to death. Actually, the readers are given different perspectives, since they may see a body descending or ascending. If the first option is chosen, the readers only view death; if the second one is selected, there is the chance to review History and prepare a different future. And this is what O'Brien, DeLillo, and Foer propose in their texts.

Noam Chomsky (2001, p.81) states that the people of the Western world want to have peace, they must be willing to "examine what lies behind the atrocities" to be able to understand the reasons for horrible acts such as the attacks of September 11, and know how to react to avoid more violence. This way, we will be ready to deal with "Them" not only thinking about "Us."

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