

## Postmodern Fiction Challenges: Reevaluating the Vietnam War and the War on Terror

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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,” according to Hayden White, has raised considerable uncertainty about the “truth” in official historical accounts (*Tropics* 122). Literature, then, offers an advantageous opportunity to discuss and present new approaches to past events, from a different standpoint. Through their writings, authors Don DeLillo, Tim O’Brien, and Jonathan Safran Foer show their concern with the records of U.S. History, since trying to reassess some of the “truths” that were imposed on people throughout the years has become a topic of supreme importance.

What is “truth”? Will we ever be able to know it? Postmodern fiction has presented this subject in a very intense manner, boldly opposing the belief that we can have the “truth” in a total, closed form. Writers have provided multiple approaches to official History, once regarded as definite, by bringing forth the voices of groups marginalized in the past, and whose histories were ignored. In this sense, those novels to which Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction” can be applied have allowed the reader to revisit a certain historical period with a broader and more critical view. Hutcheon states that,

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. (*Politics* 66)

Hutcheon also observes that there is not one truth, but “*truths* in the plural” (*Poetics* 109), and the writers studied in this paper intend to make their readers conscious of this state of affairs.

In order to express that the belief in only one truth is unacceptable, 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 in the form of graphic experimentations make the readers feel responsible for establishing the relationships among the various parts of the work, as they ultimately realize that the narratives are not restricted to one interpretation. In his essay “The Power of History,” Don DeLillo reinforces the argument that we need fiction to understand what was concealed by History: “The past is great and deep. It can make a writer expansive, open him to perspectives and emotions that his own narrower environment has failed to elicit” (63). The narratives are rapid in movement, in an apparent state of confusion. This fosters in the readers a very active attitude towards the texts, which will enable them to follow the development of the story and to construct meaning(s).

Tim O’Brien is a veteran of the Vietnam War and wrote many works about the event, but through the perspective of the soldiers, those who were really walking in the mud, who had to deal with all sorts of troubles and were unable 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 does regard *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as an autobiography, I chose not to follow this path in my study, but rather to examine it as a revision of that historical period. Thus, in this paper, the “I” that appears in the narrative is a fictional narrator and character called O’Brien, who was drafted in 1968. Herzog, 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” (900). Moreover, he 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” (900). 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 make up 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?” (*If I Die in a Combat Zone* 18) What was right? What was wrong? The notions of good and evil are always present in the narrative (“I declared the war evil” [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 a coward in the eyes of his townspeople, who hardly gave any thought as to 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 people really understood the actual reasons for the troops to be in Vietnam.

The fabrication 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 that describe the narrator’s hometown. He explains that he grew up between wars, being thus a product of a generation of baby-boomers. His town was a place for “wage earners today – not very spirited people, not very thoughtful people” (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” (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, though, had to face a different reality.

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. (43)

The moments of horror that the soldiers had to go through make the reader think about what true 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, and when asked about the case when a country fights a wrong war, those people just shrugged" (21). Should those drafted defend the country, even though they think the war is wrong? The narrator did not understand the reason for fighting that war, but went to Vietnam.

The narrator explains that in the previous year, 1967, he was studying in Prague, and he describes "an evening in July of 1967" (94) when he was having a beer with a student from Czechoslovakia, whose roommate was from North Vietnam. The Czech student introduced him to Li, who studied Economics and was a lieutenant in the North Vietnamese Army. They talked about the war, and Li stated that the American President, Johnson, "was misguided and wrong," and that he did not see the North Vietnamese as aggressors in that war; on the contrary, they were just "defending Vietnam from American aggression" (95). This passage contributes to show that there are always at least two possibilities of evaluating a fact, and depending on the source, one can know the historical past through a certain bias. In the case of a war, it is also important to take into account the economic interests of groups to whom an armed conflict may bring financial gain.

He goes to Vietnam in 1968 and describes scenes from his arrival there ("First there is some mist. Then, when the plane begins its descent, there are pale gray mountains" [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 were over; others lost their legs. When the soldiers had to send out an ambush, they were afraid of "getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunted countryside" (87). The narrative shows that the military were left without any definite plan or direction, they were scared: "It is sad when you learn you're not much of a hero" (146). How can one identify a brave man? "Grace under pressure, Hemingway would say" (146), as the narrator points out. Is this sufficient? The narrator does not agree with Hemingway's position, and the question remains: What is a hero after all?

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 the 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 management, of purpose. At a certain moment, the soldiers did not know what they were in Vietnam for, and took it out on innocent civilians.

When speaking about the massacre in My Lai, Major Callicles explains 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" (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 aptly queries, "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" ("The Value" 25).

History is thoroughly debated in the novel, and one of these moments of intense debate 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 him or herself whose side of the

war is portrayed in the official reports. It is obvious that O'Brien and Edwards have opposing views, have different versions of the facts, such as their views about 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" (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" (60). Captain Edwards states that going to Vietnam is "a fine, heroic moment for American soldiers" (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 motives which would make him support that war. He could understand people fighting Hitler, they had reasons for that, he thought; however, in his opinion, the conflict in Vietnam was "a war fought for uncertain reasons" (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 in that regard compared to Ernest Hemingway, since their descriptions, even the most violent ones, do not arouse high emotions. In the novel, Private O'Brien remarks that Hemingway and Pyle wrote about war, without discussing whether it was right or wrong. He recalls 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" (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 was determined "to write about the army" (93) after his time in Vietnam was over. In so doing, he would then 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" (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" (23). The message is that we will never know the whole truth. This representation of History in fiction is a way to indicate that 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. Will this conflict become a tragic repetition of the Vietnam War? In order to comment on the 9/11 terrorist attacks, two texts are worth discussing here: "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. "Terror's response is a narrative that has been developing over the years, only now becoming inescapable" (33), DeLillo argues in his text. In fact, DeLillo became aware of the fact that the environment for terror had been present in America for a long time. Since the 1970s DeLillo has been addressing 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" (34). Even after living in this environment, the terrorist did not change his mind. He had an objective, he was conscious 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" (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 even acknowledge – is not capable of acknowledging – our self. The other bypasses us. (1242)

DeLillo states that "Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists" (33). Those men moved violently against U.S. modernity, without a clear understanding of American society. DeLillo also 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” (34). Those men do believe that they are fighting for a cause. If, in the past, communism was terrifying, now terror has other agents, and the opposition Us versus Them still holds: “The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term “Us and Them” has never been so striking, at either end” (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” (35). The city was in chaos after the attacks, and the narrative reveals this situation through the techniques employed by the author. The main passage that represents this extremely confusing moment is when the 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: “Something is happening” (36), Marc says. 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 could be the real danger.

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” (37). When they left the building, “They came out into a world of ash and near night” (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” (37). Such comments can be taken as a sign 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 of the reasons for the attacks. DeLillo points out that there is the technological advancement of the United States, a nation that “is comfortable with the future” (39), in opposition to those terrorists, “who want to bring back the past” (34). The author shows that the 9/11 attacks have brought new challenges to



the Western civilization, since terrorists are able to accomplish their aims by using methods that can destroy any place in an unexpected way, including biological and chemical weapons, and that is why they want to establish the rules of the war. However, some questions remain unanswered: Who are the real enemies? Where are they? Are the pre-emptive attacks the best option to fight terrorism?

Undoubtedly, the author uses the very course of writing to try to understand why the attacks happened. It is also a healing process. Some people did not even believe that they were watching a real fact on TV: "It was bright and totalizing, and some of us said it was unreal" (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" (39). What is left is language, this powerful instrument, and the writer uses to attempt to recreate all the suffering those people went through and describe his personal view on the matter. DeLillo's most recent novel, *Falling Man*, published in 2007, discusses 9/11 through the lives of people who survived the attacks and focuses on the terrorists who were going to destroy the World Trade Center.

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 and will not.

Jonathan Safran Foer's work also focuses on 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, amidst pieces of a vase he had broken. On the back of the envelope, the word "Black" is written, 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]" (51).

Oskar's journey pushes the novel forward. While the reader is introduced to the characters and exposed to the aftermath of 9/11, the novel also reveals the five messages that his father, Thomas Schell, had left in the answering machine when the terrorist act happened. They are scattered throughout the novel, on pages 14, 69, 168, 207, and 280. In

these messages, one notices a progression from the moment when people had no idea of what was going on (“*Listen, something’s happened*” [message #1, 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, 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, 207]), up to the moment when the character’s father 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 – (280)	

The narrative technique conveys all the anguish of the final moments of those people’s lives. A mixture of fear and dread 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 regardless of what happens. Schell’s family buried an empty coffin. The narrative shows his life coming to an end without any logical 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 in which the reader cannot read anything because they appear 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 sequences of photos is the one which portrays 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 either 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 the last option is what O’Brien, DeLillo, and Foer propose in their texts.

According to Noam Chomsky, if the people of the Western world want to have peace, they must be willing to “examine what lies behind the atrocities” (81) in order to be able to understand acts such as the attacks of September 11, and know how to react so as to avoid more violence. For this reason, the greatest challenge we have to face now is to be ready to deal with “Them” not only thinking about “Us.”

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