A Reaction to Tim O’Brien’s Views on Death

Personal Reflection Essay

Towards the end I began to count. One more laugh ma. Two more smiles. Three more hugs, please? Four more words. Five more nights. Six more sunrises.

Everything was so *final* in the end. For three weeks I knew what was coming. In a way I’m glad I knew; it helped me accept the blow, allowed me to say goodbye. But nothing, not even my own proximity to the inevitable could have prepared me for the moment I told my ma it was okay to leave me; or the following moment when she did. I was the reason she stuck around for so long, see. My dad told me all she ever wanted was a kid; all she ever wanted was to see a little girl grow up, and she did. I’m not a kid now—she made sure of that; but that doesn’t change the fact that I still want my god damn mommy. It’s strange to think of everything death robbed from her and I; she will never see me graduate college, never see me get married, and she will never meet my kids.

Yet we all carry things in our hearts. We all have things which weigh us down; hammer us into the earth, leaving us alone to dust ourselves off. But death—death changes you and your life like nothing else. To actually witness death, to have hollow cheeks or a star shaped hole burnt into your memory—well, near nothing on this earth can truly compare to its branding devastation. To experience death is to become completely immersed in the mundane finality of life. Most people are fortunate enough to never bear witness to a last breath. Fortunate enough to never watch death eat away at the soul of someone you never would have deemed breakable; but I suppose cancer is kind of a bitch. The experience of witnessing death is something the author of *The Things They Carried,* Tim O’Brien, and I have in common. This unfortunate similarity, as well as the way in which Tim O’Brien writes about death in *The Things They Carried,* prompts me to re-evaluate the way I look at, and deal with, life’s finality in death.

Tim O’Brien details his accounts with death in his book *The Things They Carried* and I cannot but help to draw parallels between our experiences. Both he and I have born witness to deaths resultant of battle. The battles fought were dramatically different, one in a “shit field” in Vietnam and the other in a hospital bed in Helena, Montana, yet they both proved utterly fatal. It’s tragic really, O’Brien’s dear friend Kiowa and my own mother each died fighting a fight they had never wanted any part of. Upon witnessing fellow friend and solider Kiowa drown in a field of shit O’Brien proclaims he lost a piece of his former self and became “mean inside” (O’Brien 190). Watching a soul slip quietly from the body rips the heart from the observer and in time, as both O’Brien and I found, they may find it is missing. Left by my mother, I felt the pain of loss spread coldness where there used to be warmth, anger where there used to be joy. Death becomes one of the few moments you can pin-point in time as a concrete, life-changing factor. Recognizing these parallels between O’Brien and myself allowed me to take in the stories’ teachings to help myself along in the process of grief.

Throughout *The Things They Carried* O’Brien urges the reader to recognize the unavoidable collision of beauty and tragedy. Some of us, like myself, are lucky enough to say goodbye to their loved ones before they fade from the earth. Though my mother is gone, I was still allowed a beautiful moment in the midst of tragedy to say all I felt necessary. Tim O’Brien, like so many others, however, was not given the chance to say goodbye to his friend. Yet, in many ways *The Things They Carried* is very much like a goodbye to Kiowa. He takes his tragedy of loss and makes it into a beautiful piece of art. This theme of taking something awful, and looking for beauty within it is something O’Brien constantly does throughout his book. He argues “war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty” (O’Brien 77). Undoubtedly, if a fire was blazing through a forest, it may seem like a travesty. However, though the fire is awful, in its wake it will pave the way for something beautiful. Nothing is inherently black and white, even the most seemingly obvious tragedies, for one cannot exist without the other. Without ugliness how could one fathom the magnificence of beauty? O’Brien continually points this out throughout the stories. Even the man O’Brien felt horrified to have ‘killed’ was described in a seemingly beautiful manner. He speaks of a “star shaped hole,” “daint[iness],” and a “butterfly [landing] on his chin;” all of the beauty surrounding the fallen Vietnamese man (O’Brien 118). Death is not supposed to be beautiful, but O’Brien depicts it so regardless. It is this kind of mindset I wish incorporate into the way I think of death. Instead of focusing on my complete horror, I wish to focus on the small, almost insignificant things which made the death of my mother tragically beautiful.

In the wake of death nothing seems quite real. It is a strange concept really, to accept that I will never see my mother laughing again. Yet, as Tim O’Brien states in his anecdote about his childhood love Linda who died at the age of nine, those who die never really seem dead. In this final chapter of the book O’Brien provided me with an alternative understanding to the concept of loss. The departed are never *truly* gone. They will forever be something we carry upon our memories. The idea that my mom will never really leave me is something I had not considered until I read O’Brien’s tale of Linda. It seems odd my mom will not travel through time with me, death makes us feel like the world around us should have stopped; as though time should have frozen the moment our loved one ceased to exist. The world is not conceivable without them. When O’Brien revisits the field he witnessed Kiowa sink into he is surprised to see it has moved on in time. He did not expected a place filled with so much loss and devastation to be filled with so much sunlight and butterflies. Death leads to desperate attempts to hang onto life as it used to be, which in turn manifests an eventual, crushing realization that holding onto the past is futile. O’Brien and I had death rip our lives away from us, and no matter how hard we will it, we can never again be “that gentile, naïve kid[s] [we] used to be” (O’Brien 200).

Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* prompts me to a further developmental stage in the grief process. I hope to be able to absorb O’Brien’s lessons into my own life and look at the death of my mother in a new, positive light. She is gone, and there is nothing I can do to change it. Yet, I can remember to live, be in the moment, and keep the beauty of life always in the back of my mind.