
Through Another Looking Glass: Helping Students See Themselves in O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*

Melissa Brandt

The exact moment I first heard the words of Tim O’Brien, I was in an English class in the eleventh grade at Worthington Senior High School in Worthington, Minnesota. Darren Bauman, a senior, sat in front of me and wore t-shirts with the days of the week printed on the back. I remember Darren’s t-shirts because, well, Darren was as cute as a button—if “cute as a button” means you imagine yourself kissing him every day of Advanced English in the eleventh grade. Needless to say, he made it difficult to concentrate in class.

During one of my Darren daydreams, my teacher, Mrs. Ellen Copperud, opened *The Things They Carried* and started reading. As she turned the pages, her words drifted in and out of my consciousness like a jigsaw puzzle replacing bits of Darren’s chestnut hair, dark eyes, and daily t-shirts with O’Brien’s weighted descriptions, vivid images, and troubled thoughts, until the Darren puzzle faded into the background, and O’Brien’s words became the completed portrait in my mind. My crush for Darren was supplanted with the love I felt for Tim O’Brien’s linguistic magnetism. I never looked back. Mrs. Copperud explained to us that Tim O’Brien had attended the very same school that we were attending. A mere twenty years earlier, he sat in our classrooms, looked at our walls, and walked our hallways.

Tim O’Brien and I have more in common than grow-

ing up in the same small town. We share a space intertwined with memories of similar places and events. I know the smell of the public library where O'Brien spent his Saturdays as a boy. I've been to the Annual Turkey Day Parade, the same parade he mocks in his novels. I've sat in the bleachers near the baseball diamond where he played little league. We share history and, because of our history, it is difficult for me not to interact with a book like *In the Lake of the Woods* in a more visceral way than the general reader.

He describes our shared hometown: "The settlers must have seen endless plains and eased their bones and said, 'Here as well as anywhere, it's all the same.' The town became a place for wage earners. It is a place for wage earners today—not very spirited people, not very thoughtful people" (*If I Die* 13). Not a very flattering portrayal. Because of his coldness toward Worthington, when I read *In the Lake of the Woods*, my tendency is to react both bitterly, with the desire to protect my small town upbringing, and with irony, because, like O'Brien, I will never move back.

In the Lake of the Woods is a novel in which the main character, John Wade, the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota, was running for the US Senate when it is discovered that he participated in the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. He and his wife, Kathy Wade, travel to northern Minnesota to escape the press after the embarrassing political defeat. After a few days at the lake, Kathy disappears. The novel revisits John and Kathy's lives together, reviews the evidence associated with Kathy's disappearance and John's disturbing past, and invents different hypotheses on what may have happened to Kathy Wade.

Although the main storyline of the novel is fiction, O'Brien has admitted that *In the Lake of the Woods* is his "most personal" text (*Tim O'Brien* 3). *In the Lake of the Woods* includes intimate details of O'Brien's home life as a child, frightening revelations of his relationship with his father, and historical connections to the real life events he experienced in the war. These connections and the idea that a text of fiction can be part autobiography are nothing new to the literary world. Many texts

of fiction use elements of myth, history, and biography; but there are fictional texts that combine these elements into something more: biomythography.

The poet Audre Lorde coined the term biomythography in an attempt to create a new genre of writing. Her book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, explores each of the elements of myth, history, and biography and creates a new life for the author. Since Lorde's creation of the concept, biomythography has taken on a development of its own. Professor Edward Warburton from the University of California defines biomythography as:

Made up of myth, history, and biography, all the ways in which we perceive the world around us. It is a term that describes the strategy for writing down the meanings of identity within the structure of personal, social, cultural and historical life. The process of biomythography takes the form of multiple media outside the conventional literary structures of autobiography, such as choreography, film, music, playwriting, poems, slide show, short story, video, etc. In short, biomythography teases out the layerings [sic] of differences within the individual subject as they write their material world. It is a way to view myth as much a part of history as is historical fact; to intertwine the two, creating a new understanding of mythic and historical personalities; to (re)create yourself not so much by a chronological reading of events and people (real and imagined) from your life, as it is by theme, image and sound; to establish an identity as you would have yourself be read. (Warburton)

In some ways *In the Lake of the Woods* is by definition the opposite of Professor Warburton's explanation of biomythography. O'Brien does not claim the novel runs parallel to his own life. He is not seeking out a new identity through his characters in the way that Audre Lorde has done. He is, however, intertwining myth, biography, and history to create a new perception of "mythic and historical personalities." His goal, unlike that of authors like Lorde who wish to create a new biography, is to push readers into a re-examination of history, which includes a re-examination of elements of autobiography. More than this, he seems to be pushing us to an examination of

how and where history is created and constructed, both within our minds and within our world.

For the purpose of this article, I will be examining O'Brien's text by breaking down the individual elements of biomythography. I will first examine the biography of the novel, sifting through each chapter for the moments that relate directly to O'Brien's life. O'Brien claims this novel is his most personal for a reason. He includes an anonymous narrator-biographer in the story that sounds mysteriously like O'Brien himself. O'Brien uses the narrator-biographer to interject thoughts, opinions, and beliefs on how he perceives the unfolding aspects of the story. Although he rarely allows the narrator-biographer to interject thoughts when he discloses personal moments of his real life past, there are many real life revelations contained in the narrator's footnotes, creating a parallel text with disturbing connections to the material within the primary text. And while O'Brien would argue "that ultimately questions related to facts about his life and the factual consistency or inconsistency of characters and events in his books—all happening-truths—are insignificant and should not interfere with readers' enjoying and identifying with his works" (Herzog 896), the factual consistency and inconsistencies add another layer of complexity to the novel that merits exploring.

Second, I will be examining the elements of myth within the novel. When dissecting the fictional character John Wade, I intend to focus on Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth. O'Brien's text meets several of Campbell's elements required of a traditional hero, but a few of these elements are subverted by creating a hero that can never truly come home. Contrary to Campbell's definition, I will also examine the myth of politics. When I use the term myth in breaking down the political figures in the novel, it will not be under the umbrella of Campbell's monomyth. When I refer to the "myth" of politics, I am commenting on the falsehoods that politicians often present to the world in order to maintain the love of the country.

Next, I will examine the historical elements of the novel. O'Brien presents historically documented incidents within

alternating chapters, titled “Evidence,” in which he weaves medical histories of his fictional characters and actual quotes from historical figures. He defends this approach to fiction and “narrative deceit as an effective technique for introducing listeners to the complex intermingling of facts, fiction, truth, lies, memory, and imagination” (Herzog 895). For this section of the article, I will take a look back at historical documents and literature printed regarding the Vietnam War.

Finally and most importantly, I will investigate how each of these elements could be developed and applied to teaching the text in an English classroom. I intend to explore short stories, films, and novels that could be read alongside *In the Lake of the Woods*, as well as opportunities for academic and creative assignments that will expand student knowledge of biography, myth, and history. But first, let’s explore O’Brien’s biography.

Section I: O’Brien’s Biography: A Riddle Wrapped in an Enigma

Tim O’Brien is rarely straightforward about his life. For example, Tobey C. Herzog begins his book with an anecdote relevant to O’Brien’s experience in the war. Herzog recalls an incident during a book tour with O’Brien in which, when presenting an address to a group including some Vietnam Veterans, O’Brien shared a personal war story:

O’Brien first described his summer of 1968, the time immediately after his graduation from college and subsequent receipt of a draft notice. He recounted his growing moral dilemma: whether to avoid induction by fleeing to Canada or serve his country by entering the army. The conflict culminated in his trip to the Rainy River, which forms part of the border between Minnesota and Canada, where O’Brien would decide his future. O’Brien continued his story with such detail and emotion that the listeners who were unfamiliar with his novels became hooked—emotionally drawn into Tim O’Brien’s life...At the end of his storytelling, O’Brien paused as the Wabash audience nodded knowingly at the story’s end: Tim O’Brien had decided to enter the army and to fight—and not to flee across the river into Canada. But then O’Brien confessed: The story was made up. (Herzog 1)

Parts of O'Brien's war story were true. He did consider crossing the border to Canada and avoiding the draft. He echoes these thoughts in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. In *If I Die*, he actually called for airline schedules from boot camp: "I called the Seattle airport and checked on fares to Dublin, Ireland. Playing it carefully, professionally, I inquired first with one of the large American firms, telling them I was a student and wanted to do research overseas" (*If I Die* 54). The rest of the story is false.

As a writer, O'Brien is fond of obscuring the path of reality by way of fiction. He uses the confusion as a tool in his real life as well. He often claims something to be true in an interview only to deny it later, which is important for a writer like O'Brien because part of his goal "as a writer is to be 'read by the centuries'—but not as a war writer. He bristles at this narrow label often pinned on him: 'It's like calling Toni Morrison a black writer or Shakespeare a king writer'" (*Tim O'Brien* 23). By giving his audience access to himself through fiction, he leaves it to the reader to find and sort out which experiences are mythical, which experiences are historical, and which experiences are biographical, and although it is not necessary to know the complete history and life of any author, it is helpful in understanding how the author's perspective shaped the narrative.

In the novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, John Wade struggles with his alcoholic father's verbal abuse. When discussing his father, O'Brien remarks he "was 'an alcoholic, bad alcoholic, institutionalized a couple of times; his alcoholism hurt me deeply'" (*Tim O'Brien* 8-9). As in the novel, O'Brien found that "dinners were an especially difficult time for O'Brien. His father would sometimes begin drinking after work and 'by the time dinner came around he would be sullen and way inside himself and the man that I loved and adored, the charming, stylish guy had vanished....I felt that I was never good enough for him, could never please him no matter what I accomplished. And to this day I still don't understand what it was that didn't please him'" (*Tim O'Brien* 9).

During these times, O'Brien's father berated Tim about

his weight and love of magic; the exact same topics became issues for John Wade, *In the Lake*'s main character, and his father in the novel:

That summer when John was eleven it got to where I [John's Mother] didn't have any choice. The drinking just got worse and worse. His father would be down at the American Legion all afternoon and half the night. Finally I got up the nerve to check him into the state treatment center up north. I hate to say it, but it was a relief to have him out of the house. John and I, we both could have supper without sitting there on the edge of our seats...everything would be better now. It wasn't, though. It never got much better. (*In the Lake* 99)

O'Brien's father was institutionalized for his drinking in the same fashion as Wade's: "He describes an occasion when his father, who was O'Brien's little league coach, was institutionalized at midseason...He was uneasy about the players' opinions of him and his father, and he hesitated to tell the team the truth about the situation" (*Tim O'Brien* 9). The hospitalization of his father was a fact then and the difficulty O'Brien had in telling the truth is accurate even today and is a problem that many people in American society are able to relate to.

Another example from the text mirroring O'Brien's own struggle states, "John loved his father a lot. I suppose that's why the teasing hurt him so bad...things were hard for John. He was too young to know what alcoholism is" (*In the Lake* 10). O'Brien seems to be attempting to sort out some of the frustration he felt with his father's alcoholism through his novel. He uses historical references as emphasis and as comparison to these moments. O'Brien uses quotes from Woodrow Wilson's biography to reflect the state of mind of his main character and of himself: "Another cousin, Jessie Bones, recalled a typical instance of Dr. Wilson's 'teasing.' The family was assembled at a wedding breakfast. Tommy [Woodrow] arrived at the table late. His father apologized on behalf of his son and explained that Tommy had been so greatly excited at the discovery of another hair in his mustache that morning that it had taken him longer to wash and dress" (*In the Lake* 195). This same teasing

is reflected in the novel, (“He was not a fat child, not at all. He was husky. He had big bones...His father teased him quite a lot. Constant teasing, you could say”) (*In the Lake* 10), and in his personal life, (“William would taunt and tease young Tim—about his weight and his disgusted response to his father’s drinking”) (*Tim O’Brien* 9).

The idea of teasing about his chubbiness and his interest in magic appears again and again: “‘I wasn’t fat,’ he said, ‘I was normal....And I didn’t jiggle. Not even once. I just didn’t’” (*In the Lake* 75) and “His father would jerk a thumb at the basement door. ‘That pansy magic crap. What’s wrong with baseball, some regular exercise?’ He’d shake his head. ‘Bubbly little pansy’” (*In the Lake* 67). The reader feels the sad state and the effects of alcohol and verbal abuse of a father on both the main character and the author.

In the novel, Wade’s father commits suicide. O’Brien’s father did not, but the physical and emotional absences could be felt regardless of whether or not the man was dead; in fact, the absences “created moments of self-consciousness for O’Brien” (*Tim O’Brien* 9). O’Brien’s anger is present in the novel and in his real life to the extent that fact and fiction begin to blur. When discussing his own life, O’Brien says, “I don’t know if it is just Americans—I doubt it—or just Midwestern Americans—I doubt it—but for the men I have known in my life, there is a kind of pressure, a fatherly pressure, over the shoulder to do well in the world” (*Tim O’Brien* 33).

The fatherly pressure that O’Brien discusses carried over to Vietnam: “This pressure sometimes pushes you to do well in bad kinds of ways, that is, to charge a bunker and get your head blown off so as to impress your father with a medal. You know that the pressure is there, a way of winning love” (*Tim O’Brien* 33). Wade and O’Brien are both desperate for their father’s love. O’Brien uses some of the exact same wording in the novel when discussing John Wade.

A guy might do something very brave—charge a bunker, maybe, or stand up tall under fire—and afterward everyone would look away and stay quiet for a while,

then somebody would say, “How the fuck’d you do that?” and the brave guy would blink and shake his head, because he didn’t know, because it was one of those incredible secrets inside him.
(In the Lake 73)

Another example of O’Brien’s real life struggle reflected through the novel is shown in John Wade’s desperate need for love from Kathy: “More than anyone she’d ever known, John needed the conspicuous display of human love—absolute, unconditional love. Love without limit. Like a hunger... Sometimes he did bad things just to be loved, and sometimes he hated himself for needing love so badly” (*In the Lake* 55, 60). He repeats the idea and desperation a third time in his non-fiction piece “The Vietnam in Me” published in the *New York Times*: “Chubby and friendless and lonely. I had come to acknowledge, more or less, the dominant principle of love in my life, how far I would go to get it, how terrified I was of losing it. I have done bad things for love, bad things to stay loved” (“The Vietnam in Me”). O’Brien’s desperation and need is obvious in the heart-breaking steps he takes in order to keep the love of Kate, his girlfriend in 1994, which results in the creation of love letters and mixed tapes. Some readers will wince in understanding and embarrassment for O’Brien’s inability to move on in his life in the way that Kate has, and the reader develops immediate concern for the author when he admits “Last night suicide was on my mind. Not whether, but how” (“The Vietnam in Me” 2).

The timing and similarities of *In the Lake of the Woods* and the non-fiction piece “The Vietnam in Me” would imply that Kate was in the forefront of O’Brien’s while writing *In the Lake*. He admits “in his 1994 article...that his personal life during the years since publication of *The Things They Carried* had been tumultuous...treatment for depression; the painful breakup of a lengthy relationship with a Harvard doctoral candidate [Kate]; and the emotional return to Quang Ngai Province and My Lai...” (*Tim O’Brien* 21). Although it may be going too far to speculate that Kathy Wade and O’Brien’s Kate are similar, it is not going far enough to acknowledge that many events in the novel and in

his life are similar. O'Brien seeks affirmation in both, and he continues seeking affirmation.

Beyond the connections to his personal life as a child and as a man, the novel also makes connections to his life as a soldier. O'Brien isn't simply drawing on the historical documents available regarding My Lai. On the contrary, he was there. He discusses his time in Pinkville, the surrounding area of My Lai given this nickname to represent the area of dense population, in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*:

Pinkville and the villages called My Lai were well known to alpha company. Even before the headlines and before the names Calley and Medina took their place in history, Pinkville was a feared and special place on the earth. In January, a month or so before I arrived in Vietnam, less than a year after the slaughter in My Lai 4, Alpha Company took part in massive Operation Russell Beach, joining forces with other army elements, boatloads of marines, the navy and air force. Subject of the intricately planned and much-touted campaign was Pinkville and the Batangan Peninsula...Despite publicity and War College strategy, the operation did not produce the anticipated results, and this unit learned some hard lessons about Pinkville. There was no reliable criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one and the same person. The unit triggered one mine after another during Operation Russell Beach. Frustration and anger built with each explosion and betrayal, one Oriental face began to look like any other, hostile and black, and Alpha Company was boiling with hate when it was pulled out of Pinkville. (*If I Die* 116)

O'Brien's firsthand experience at My Lai gives him special knowledge of the harshness of the area. He mentions several times in his memoir the anger of Alpha Company. Yet, even in his anger, he is able to maintain his humanity and feel sympathy for the Vietnamese people, a sympathy that has driven him to remind the American people of the tragedies that occurred in Vietnam.

His ability to create mystery about himself is present in the passage as well. He never writes *I was angry*; he always refers

to the anger as a presence within Alpha Company as if O'Brien was nothing but an observer at the time. He does this again in "The Vietnam in Me" when talking about love: "Vietnam was partly love. With each step, each light-year of a second, a foot soldier is always almost dead...you love your mom and dad, the Vikings, hamburgers on the grill, your pulse, your future—everything that might be lost or never come to be." Even in this passage, O'Brien slips quietly into second person voice, never taking full claim or responsibility for his feelings. Perhaps his use of second person is an effort to include an audience of readers who did not experience Vietnam. Perhaps the use of second person masks the desire to distance him from the hatred and love of Vietnam. Perhaps it is an effort to distance him from the guilt he was feeling about entering the war. Perhaps it is all three.

O'Brien was unsure of the necessity of the United States involvement in the Vietnam War from early on. He participated in war protests, took part in peace vigils and went door-to-door for Eugene McCarthy. As student-body president, O'Brien chose to back "McCarthy simply because at that time this senator was the only candidate who had taken a political stand against the war" (*Tim O'Brien* 12). When it came to receiving his draft notice, he did not show the same conviction: "I was a coward. I went to war" ("The Vietnam in Me").

The issue of politics creates an obvious bifurcation between the soldier Tim O'Brien and the soldier of John Wade. O'Brien went to war because he claims he was a coward; John Wade went to war to further his political career. Both men, however, are burdened with "all-consuming postwar guilt" (Herzog 901) and both men's guilt is reflected in the same fashion. In an interview with Tobey Herzog O'Brien admits, "'I wake up the way John Wade wakes up, screaming ugly, desperate and obscene things.[...] That 'Kill Jesus' refrain that appears throughout the book—that sense of self-hatred[...] comes from my own soul; it isn't a made-up refrain. It is a real one out of my own life'" ("True Lies" 901).

O'Brien's physical return from Vietnam is similar to John

Wade's. O'Brien writes, "When the no-smoking lights come on, you go into the back of the plane. You take off your uniform. You roll it into a ball and stuff it into your suitcase and put on a sweater and blue jeans. You smile at yourself in the mirror" (*If I Die* 209). This story is repeated in the novel: "In the gray skies over North Dakota he [Wade] went back into the lavatory, where he took off his uniform and put on a sweater and slacks, then carefully appraised himself in the mirror...After a moment he winked at himself" (*In the Lake* 41).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to verify whether or not what O'Brien has said about himself and the past is true or to separate fact from fiction in his novel. His personal biography is often contradictory. There are certain aspects about his childhood that can be verified; we know his father suffered from alcoholism. There are certain aspects about his love life that can be verified; we know that he felt a profound loss when Kate and O'Brien separated. There are certain aspects of his life as a soldier that can be verified; we know he was in My Lai. We know he holds great contempt for the atrocities that occurred there. Each of these aspects is an important part of the novel. It is O'Brien's creation of the mystery that surrounds him that has become his emotional truth. In this way, he has (re)created a new biography through *In the Lake of the Woods*.

Section II: Discovering a Hero

When focusing on the second element of biomythography, specifically myth, O'Brien emphasizes the importance of myth, theme, and imagination as a way to change the world. *In the Lake of the Woods* becomes a myth within a myth, and O'Brien's thoughts on myth and imagination relate directly to the interpretation of Joseph Campbell, author and literary theorist, on myth. Campbell describes myth as "the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind" (*Hero* 3). Campbell also believed the role of soldier was heroic and held a special place in mythology: "Joining the army, putting on a uniform, is another. You're giving up your personal life and accepting a socially determined

manner of life in the service of the society of which you are a member” (*Power of Myth* 12). As a side note, Campbell writes, “the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth” (*Hero* 3). The phrasing of this excerpt is startling. It is as if O’Brien were reading Campbell when he imagined the dreamlike moment of his character John Wade standing over Kathy with a boiling tea pot and blistering her sleeping face. O’Brien transformed Campbell’s figurative language into a literal moment within the fiction text. There are more moments of similarities in Campbell’s writing and O’Brien’s which will be explored later in this section. For now, we must return to the definition of myth.

Campbell divided his exploration of myth or the basic monomyth, a paradigm meaning the journey a hero makes, into three great steps: separation, initiation, and return, “which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (*Hero* 30). Campbell also divided the three great steps into several sub-sections. Some of the steps that Campbell identifies are subverted, overlapping, and confused within O’Brien’s text. The overlapping and confusion is partially because O’Brien does not choose to tell the story chronologically: “In commenting on his ‘bouncing around in time’ in his novels or his characters’ propensity to engage in fantastic daydreams, O’Brien emphasized that he is merely exploring the realities of the human mind” (*Tim O’Brien* 22).

Throughout *In the Lake of the Woods*, O’Brien gives the reader information most authors would save for the end of a mystery. For example, O’Brien informs the reader on page three that Kathy is missing and on page nine that a missing person’s report has been filed, a detail which he discloses in a footnote. The complex nature of the storytelling turns the contemporary notion of mystery on its head and makes the steps of the monomyth overlap. Not all of the sub-sections of the monomyth theory

exist within the novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, and the steps or layers that are presented will be explored, but not exhausted. The goal in this section is not to prove the theory of monomyth, but rather to establish that elements of myth exist within the novel as part of biomythography.

The first of Campbell's sub-sections within the great stage of departure is referred to as the "call to adventure" (*Hero* 51). He describes the call as "a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth" (*Hero* 51). For the character John Wade, the call to adventure is the Vietnam War. Both O'Brien and Wade receive their "call" in the same fashion: a draft notice. Unlike many of the soldiers in Vietnam and unlike O'Brien himself, Wade does not fight the draft: "He graduated in June of 1967. There was a war in progress, which was beyond manipulation, and nine months later he found himself at the bottom of an irrigation ditch. The slime was waist-deep. He couldn't move. The trick was to stay sane" (*In the Lake* 36). The symbolism of Wade's spiritual rite of passage taking nine months—the same amount of time as a pregnancy—and finding himself covered in slime, as in the amniotic fluid of birth, is a direct connection to Campbell's definition of the call to adventure, death, and rebirth. John Wade is born a new character and a new man in Vietnam. He becomes the Sorcerer.

Although O'Brien does not mention reading Campbell, O'Brien is quoted by Bill Moyers, interviewer and friend of Joseph Campbell:

Tim O'Brien once wrote: 'A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.' While most would not interpret myths as literal truth, those who study them tend to see in them a weighty metaphorical, archetypal truth, a truth about the unseen, ineffable dimensions of existence that lie outside the bounds of science and reason. ("On Faith & Reason")

Similarly, O'Brien comments directly on the myths he encountered as a child: "I also think that this detailed portrayal

of the horrors of violence is a reaction to the myths I grew up with as a kid: John Wayne movies and Audie Murphy movies and the little GI Joe comic books I used to read where death was inconsequential because it didn't seem very horrible at all" (*Artful Dodge*). O'Brien also comments on his respect for Toni Morrison's inclusion of myth in her text: "Mystery and myth are intermingled in a way that I very, very much admire...People are flying, but it happens mythically...That's a little thing I learned—relearned, I guess—from reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and obviously applied it in my work" (*Artful Dodge*). The comments imply that although there is no direct link between Campbell and O'Brien, the two educated men were probably aware of one another's work, and O'Brien was aware of the idea of myth.

O'Brien's idea of myth is reflected in Campbell's "call to adventure." During the "call," Wade crosses what Campbell refers to as "the first threshold" (*Hero* 77). At the threshold, "the usual person is more than content...to remain within the indicated bounds...Thus the sailors of bold vessels of Columbus, breaking the horizon of the medieval mind—sailing, as they thought, into the boundless ocean of immortal being that surrounds the cosmos, like an endless mythological serpent biting its tail—had to be cozened and urged on like children" (*Hero* 78). Again, O'Brien connects to the hero's journey through imagery. He presents the very image of the snakes to guide the reader, but corrupts the image in an unlikely way:

He compared their love to a pair of snakes he'd seen along a trail near Pinkville, each snake eating the other's tail, a bizarre circle of appetites that brought the heads closer and closer until one of the men in Charlie company used a machete to end it. 'That's how our love feels,' John wrote, 'like we're swallowing each other up, except in a good way, a perfect Number One Yum-Yum way, and I can't wait to get home and see what would've happened if those two dumbass snakes finally ate each other's heads. Think about it. The mathematics get weird.' (*In the Lake* 61)

The forceful separation of the serpent through use of the machete

symbolizes the forceful and violent separation of John and Kathy. It also represents John's fear of moving beyond the threshold and his desire to remain where he is powerful. He extends his stay in Vietnam: "Maybe someday I'll be able to explain it, but right now I can't leave this place. I have to take care of a few things, otherwise I won't ever get home. Not the right way" (*In the Lake* 147).

In mythology, the jungle is a place of darkness and evil, and O'Brien's setting strengthens the connection between John (or the Sorcerer) and the hero myth. Campbell writes, "The regions of the unknown (desert, jungle, deep sea, alien land, etc.) are free fields for the projection of the unconscious content. Incestuous *libido* and patricidal *destrudo* are thence reflected back against the individual and his society in forms suggesting threats of violence and fancied dangerous delight" (*Hero* 79). O'Brien supports this in the novel through the details of the Vietnam War. The soldiers in Vietnam and the jungle commit horrific deeds and acts of unspeakable violence and get away with it. The jungle or "free field" and the escalating violence of the troops is the new zone (My Lai) in which Sorcerer again loses himself. "For a few seconds," writes O'Brien, "Sorcerer shut his eyes and retreated behind the mirrors in his head, pretending to be elsewhere, but even then the landscapes kept coming at him fast and lurid" (*In the Lake* 105). Wade finds himself face down in a paddy, and "The others had vanished...the wind seemed to pick him up and blow him from place to place" (*In the Lake* 105). The wind blows him from man to man in his unit, each killing and performing horrific deeds: "T'Souvas was shooting children. Doherty and Terry were finishing off the wounded. This was not madness, Sorcerer understood. This was sin...And then for a while Sorcerer let himself glide away" (*In the Lake* 108).

Another great stage of Campbell's monomyth is referred to as the initiation. During the initiation stage the hero must face a "road of trials." It is in this stage that "...having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials"

(*Hero* 97). For John Wade this landscape is again the jungles of Vietnam. Campbell writes, “it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage” (*Hero* 97). Wade’s power is magic.

John Wade uses his magic as power over the enemy, over his fellow soldiers, and over his own mind. O’Brien writes, “Sorcerer, they called him: ‘Sorcerer’s our man.’ And for John Wade...the nickname was like a special badge, an emblem of belonging and brotherhood...A nifty sound, too—Sorcerer—it had magic, it suggested certain powers, certain rare skills and aptitudes” (*In the Lake* 37). He delights and entertains the men with his powers, winning them over and using the benign power to his advantage: “Amazing, they’d say. Man’s plugged into the spirit world. John Wade encouraged the mystique” (*In the Lake* 38). For Wade these powers are connected to evil. O’Brien writes, “He couldn’t go wrong. Wickedness was everywhere. ‘I’m the company witch doctor,’ he wrote Kathy. ‘These guys listen to me. They actually believe in this shit’” (*In the Lake* 38). He is attempting to control those around him with his magic. He will continue to try to use this power to control the polls and to control Kathy when he returns to the United States

In Vietnam, Wade’s power leads to murder when he reflexively kills a farmer and a fellow soldier. Wade is offered many moments in the story when he could explain or confess his wrongdoings to the world, showing the world the horrible nature of what has happened. Instead he chooses to forget. The magic of forgetting for Wade is not transformative; it is merely a way of coping. Wade is a selfish man attempting to forget what he is destined to remember, what is his “boon” or knowledge, what he must pass on to the rest of the world: the atrocities that human beings are capable of. Otherwise the people of the world are destined again and again to repeat these same mistakes. “John Wade did his best to apply the trick of forgetfulness...he went out of his way to confront hazard, walking point or leading night patrols, which were acts of erasure, a means of burying one great horror,” but the trick does not help. Nonetheless, “sometimes the

trick almost worked. Sometimes he almost forgot” (*In the Lake* 148).

During the morning of the massacre, Wade has a sense that “something was wrong. He felt dazed and half asleep, still dreaming wild dawn dreams...All he could do was close his eyes and kneel there and wait for whatever was wrong with the world to right itself,” writes O’Brien (*In the Lake* 104,108). His powers as Sorcerer are useless here:

Sorcerer thought he could get away with murder. He believed it. After he’d shot PFC Weatherby—which was an accident, the purest reflex—he tricked himself into believing it hadn’t happened the way it happened. He pretended he wasn’t responsible; he pretended he couldn’t have done it and therefore hadn’t; he pretended it didn’t matter much; he pretended that if the secret stayed inside him, with all the other secrets, he could fool the world and himself too. (*In the Lake* 68)

O’Brien details Wade’s state of mind: “At times he wondered about his mental health. The internal terrain had gone blurry; he couldn’t get his bearings. ‘Something’s wrong,’ he wrote Kathy. ‘Don’t do this to me. I’m not blind—Sorcerer can see’” (*In the Lake* 39). He is unable to differentiate between John Wade and the Sorcerer, and the Sorcerer’s magic is winning. Later, this magic takes a more concrete form when he changes his military record in order to erase the past. He was reassigned to duty in a battalion office. It was here that Wade attempts to erase the evils he has committed.

Over the next two hours he made the necessary changes, mostly retyping, some scissors work, removing his name from each document and carefully tidying up the numbers... Among the men in Charlie Company he was known only as Sorcerer. Very few had ever heard his real name; fewer still would recall it. And over time, he trusted, memory itself would be erased. (*In the Lake* 269)

He does not use his powers over magic for good purposes. He uses them for self-gain, which further subverts his role as hero.

Therefore, when John returns to the States, he is unable to make it a better place; he, instead, becomes an anti-hero. He hasn't learned what he needs to about humanity and can never truly become a fully realized hero as defined by Campbell.

One adventure cycle ends for Sorcerer and another begins when he is sent back to the States to pursue a political career. It could be argued that this return to the United States is equal to Campbell's return of the hero from his hero-quest; however, John Wade does not come back to the United States as himself. He returns as the Sorcerer. "He was still gliding," writes O'Brien (*In the Lake* 42). He is still inward, attempting to overcome his internal trials. His continued dreaming validates the nature of where he is in the mythological process. The passage continues with a list of dreams that Wade is unable to stop:

Exotic fevers swept through his blood. He couldn't get traction on his own dreams...the dream-reels kept unwinding. Crazy stuff. Kathy shoveling rain off a sidewalk. Kathy waving at him from the wing of an airplane. At one point, near dawn, he found himself curled up on the floor, wide awake, conversing with the dark. He was asking his father to please stop dying. Over and over he kept saying please, but his father wouldn't. (*In the Lake* 42)

He is unable to use his powers to stop the dreams, and the hallucinations become real life for Wade. Campbell writes, "All these different mythologies give us the same essential quest. You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance...There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem with staying with that...or returning with the boon" (*Power of Myth* 129).

It is in this return that the hero can either succeed or fail by returning with what he has learned. John Wade fails, but O'Brien's anonymous narrator takes over for Wade. Campbell writes, "When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source...the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy...But the responsibility has been

frequently refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernal ecstasy" (*Hero* 193). John has physically returned from Vietnam, but he is unable to pass on what he has learned.

O'Brien uses his narrator to enter the next stage of the quest, "applying the boon." It is up to the narrator, who has been privy to Wade's journey, to use what he has learned to make the world a better place, and it is here where the novel becomes a myth within a myth. O'Brien allows John Wade to drift, literally and figuratively, away from the story, forever on his own quest to find Kathy:

"Seriously, I'd be fine," he said. "A compass and maps, no problem. Maybe a radio."

"So?" Claude said. "And then what?"

"Just look."

"Right. End up same place as your wife."

"It's something I have to try."

Pat lifted her gaze. "God, such chivalry.

I love it. I bet Kathy would too."

"I don't mean—"

"The Lone Ranger."

Claude glared across the table... "Whatever your personal problems, let's be real extra-clear.

There's this word no, it means not a chance. It means forget it."

"He's good at that," Pat said. "A good chivalrous forgetter." (*In the Lake* 240)

In the above passage the image of hero is again multi-layered. It's no accident that O'Brien's main character's name, John Wade, closely resembles America's popular movie soldier and hero, John Wayne. O'Brien often refers to the mentality of the United States entering into wars as that of (like John Wayne) the Lone Ranger: "We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger..." ("The

Vietnam in Me”). O’Brien is also referring to America when he mentions the “good chivalrous forgetter” (*In the Lake* 240). O’Brien and his narrator use what they have learned to create a novel that will help the people of the world learn from the history of Vietnam. America likes to forget the evils it has done. The Native Americans, slavery, the massacre at My Lai, all footnotes in our country’s emotional history. O’Brien writes, “Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology” (“The Vietnam in Me”). We are a country with the inability to think beyond ourselves in terms of the world.

The final layer of the previous passage is John’s intent on sacrificing himself for love. It is at this point we realize John (like the country) has not learned, and he cannot continue in the real world. Again the passage is multi-layered. Wade is using his magic one last time to disappear with Kathy.

Wade’s disappearance opens the door for O’Brien’s narrator to offer history. Even when the massacre was front page news, the nation did not seem to care. The issue wasn’t *what* happened; the issue was what happened *now that we had been caught*. Everyone wanted to forget, just as John Wade did and just as the nation did. Even the historical accounts of My Lai comment on our ability to forget:

My Lai is now almost completely forgotten, erased almost entirely from the national consciousness. What was once an image of incandescent horror has become at most a vague recollection of something unpleasant that happened during the Vietnam War. Even the newspapers of the time, a process of eclipse can be traced clearly. What was first a “massacre” quickly became a “tragedy” and was then referred to as an “incident.” (Bilton and Sim 4).

O’Brien’s myth within a myth is attempting to force the nation to remember. The forgetting hasn’t made the nation better. O’Brien is trying to “apply the boon” and to show us how a situation like My Lai can happen again. He is trying to prevent future tragedies. O’Brien’s anonymous narrator confers the boon or applies what humanity must learn:

I arrived in-country a year after John Wade, in 1969, and walked exactly the ground he walked...I know what happened that day. I know how it happened... It was the wickedness that soaks into your blood and slowly heats up and begins to boil. Frustration, partly. Rage, partly. The enemy was invisible. They were ghosts. They killed us with land mines and booby traps; ...This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for in my view such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it's to bear witness to the mystery of evil. (*In the Lake* 199)

Sadly, we have not learned. Receiving the boon requires the nation to remember and take custody of our knowledge. It requires leaders to take responsibility for mistakes and make changes for the better. We have forgotten Vietnam. In many ways, John's hero-journey or quest is the same quest of the nation. As a nation we hear the "call to adventure"; we often experience "rebirth"; we meet "supernatural aids"; we receive knowledge or a "boon." It is when we attempt to apply the knowledge regarding war that we stumble in the same way that Wade stumbled.

By forgetting our past, our mythology, we are removing the part of ourselves that is required for us to grow. Each lesson is a clue to create a better world. Without these memories we are lost and will be destined to commit the same crimes again, until we learn. Those in society who remember the past have not forced the issue. Campbell says it best: "Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life...We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about" (*Power of Myth* 5-6). We have forgotten the inner value of human nature. We have forgotten our history.

Section III: The Fiction of History

To fully understand the nature of the country and to get an idea of Tim O'Brien's state of mind during the Vietnam War, we must first revisit what historians have written during this time and examine the third element of biomythography: history.

Incidents that go back as far as the cold war, McCarthyism, Vietnam, and occurrences like Watergate helped to nurture the cancer of mistrust toward the government that now exists in the minds of the American people, but nothing fertilized this mistrust or pierced the hearts of the citizens like the graphic stories and pictures of the life of soldiers in Vietnam, specifically the My Lai Massacre.

America officially entered the Vietnam War in 1965 (although many historians agree that American was involved in the war much earlier than this year). President Lyndon Johnson decided to enter the war through a resolution of Congress known as the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” (Caputo 28). The resolution was named after two American destroyer boats that reported “they were under attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats” (Caputo 28). Questions now remain as to whether or not either of the attacks actually occurred. The gulf incident combined with the fear of the “domino theory: If we leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs, the consequences of this defeat in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be disastrous” (Karnow 399). Even though it never happened, the “domino theory,” or belief that other countries near Vietnam would fall to communism, was the push the government needed to become an active participant in the war in Vietnam.

Initially, the American population supported Johnson’s decision to participate in the Vietnam War in an effort to stop the spread of Communism, but this soon changed. Television news crews brought the American people face-to-face with what was happening. Philip Caputo, a lieutenant in Vietnam and a Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist, writes, “ultimately, television’s graphic, moving pictures of burning villages, dead bodies, blood-covered soldiers and civilians, and panic-stricken children would bring the war into Americans’ living rooms. In the United States, the immediacy and the vividness of television reports would profoundly affect opinions about the war” (Caputo 68). Previously, the North Vietnamese had been reported as a weak and easily defeated enemy, but the impression of the strength of the North was “reinforced by the oftentimes biased news reports”

(Caputo 76). President Johnson “never went on campaign to fully explain to the American people why he was sending troops to Vietnam” (Caputo 78). Johnson’s unwillingness to share the reasons for involvement behind the war encouraged America’s distrust and spoke to the nature of Johnson’s character, which O’Brien explores in the novel. Aides and those close to Johnson claimed, “too bold an approach would be difficult to justify to the American public” (Karnow 397) and urged Johnson to remain quiet.

The public’s support of the war quickly started to dissipate. News reports, a tight-lipped president, combined with reports of atrocities such as the My Lai massacre turned the public completely against the war. Several of the antiwar supporters included men involved in the draft. In his book, *10,000 Days of Thunder*, Caputo quotes Tim O’Brien’s sentiments about the draft:

‘There were a lot of us in Vietnam who didn’t want to be there, and many of us didn’t have the courage to do what the resisters did. It took a lot of courage to cross the border and leave behind your family and your hometown and your girlfriend...I ended up going to Vietnam just to protect my reputation and sense of self-esteem, but the guys who went to Canada somehow were able to find the moral courage to make a choice they knew was gonna dog them the rest of their lives.’ (Caputo 88)

With American support shifting, protesters used the momentum to push the antiwar movement into full swing. Johnson did not run for a second term, and President Nixon was voted into office. The push to remove troops from Vietnam began. The publishing of classified US documents, called the “Pentagon Papers,” stating that “the government had misled its citizens about a war many of its own experts felt could not be won” (Caputo 110) and abuse of power by President Nixon cemented the complete mistrust of the American people toward government, politicians, and leaders in the American military. The lack of trust continues today, especially with current incidents from the Iraq War like that of the mistreatment of

prisoners at Abu Ghraib. There were many, many more historical incidents that could be expanded upon to understand the nature of America's mistrust of government, but for the purpose of this essay, a general mindset of the public is all that is needed, and the mindset during the late 1960s and early 1970s was to get out of Vietnam.

Even though soldiers like O'Brien wanted out of the war, the fear of losing respect and love was an enormous issue, so much so that it became a theme in much of his work. This love of country theme, or the desire to do what is patriotic so as not to lose the love of country, family, and friends, is particularly applicable in the novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, because of the in-depth history that O'Brien gives of the event. Wars and/or the conclusion of war seem to be decided based on the mood of the nation. Polls are used as a measurement of love; and decisions are made out of fear of losing the love of the country. Political beliefs become influenced by loyalty, rumor, and artificial guidelines.

Many times politicians make decisions based on myth and what they believe to be true or through purposeful misinformation by altering historical facts in order to create a universal perception and more socially acceptable version of history. This is where biomythography and Tim O'Brien fit in. Thematically, O'Brien's novel connects to biomythography "as a way to view myth as much a part of history as historical fact" (Warburton). In the novel, O'Brien attempts to create a new understanding of politics, to create an insight into the minds of politicians, to give a glimpse into America's dark interest in politics and violence, and to remind readers of the atrocities in My Lai; he does this, again, through the character of John Wade.

The desire and need for politicians to maintain the love of the country parallel John Wade's reasons for entering politics. O'Brien states, "That's why I made him a politician. Part of what drives politicians is to be loved. Politicians are looking for love and approval and affection. That drives them at least as much as anything else" (Edelman). In this part of the novel, historical

and fictional characters overlap. These desperate sentiments are also reflected in the three presidents that are mentioned in the novel: Wilson, Nixon, and Johnson.

Woodrow Wilson is mentioned in less depth in the novel than Nixon and Johnson; however, that does not diminish the importance of his presence. Wilson is the only other president (prior to the publication of the book) that drew America into a war for less than noble reasons. Wilson began conflict with Mexico during the Mexican Revolution with little or no provocation:

The American capitalists supported Huerta, but President Woodrow Wilson did not. In April 1914, nine American soldiers were arrested for allegedly entering a prohibited zone in Tampico. With this action, Wilson had an excuse to invade Mexico. Wilson sent marines to Veracruz, a Mexican port, and the force overthrew Huerta. Mexicans responded with anti-American riots, and the European press denounced the American intervention. (“The Tampico Affair”)

Wilson’s character also parallels John Wade in his desire to be loved:

Wilson’s own recollections of his youth furnish ample indication of his early fears that he was stupid, ugly, worthless, and unlovable...It is perhaps to this core feeling of inadequacy, of a fundamental worthlessness which must ever be disproved, that the unappeasable quality of his need for affection, power, and achievement, and the compulsive quality of his striving for perfection, may be traced. (*In the Lake* 194)

Wilson’s desperate need for approval is also similar to that of John Wade. This is evident again in the text through Wilson’s own words: “There surely never lived a man with whom love was a more critical matter than it is with me” (*In the Lake* 28). The need is also evident through Wade: “He had wanted to be loved. And to be loved he had practiced deception. He had hidden the bad things. He had tricked up his own life only for love. Only to be loved” (*In the Lake* 243). Both men were willing to go to extreme measures for acceptance.

Lyndon Johnson was willing to go to extremes as well. Johnson's historical role in O'Brien's novel is more important and more predominant than Wilson's. O'Brien writes, "Pouring out affection, [Lyndon Johnson] asked—over and over, in every letter, in fact, that survives—that the affection be reciprocated" (*In the Lake* 28). The desperate request for love and affection feels completely contradictory to Johnson's behavior. Historically, Lyndon Johnson is portrayed as a liar and a bully in O'Brien's novel: "[After his 1941 defeat] Johnson's frustration and rage erupted over hapless aides...[He was] screaming and hollering, and throwing his arms..." (*In the Lake* 100).

These same characteristics seem present in the historical information available regarding Johnson. O'Brien quotes Robert A. Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson several times throughout *In the Lake of the Woods*: "When he was a college student, [Lyndon Johnson's] fellow students...believed not only that he lied to them constantly, lied about big matters and small, lied so incessantly that he was, in a widely used phrase, 'the biggest liar on campus'—but also that some psychological element impelled him to lie" (*In the Lake* 195). Here is the same damaging and truthful quote as it appears in the introduction of Caro's book:

He was, in fact, so deeply and widely mistrusted at college that the nickname he bore during all his years there was "Bull" (for "Bullshit") Johnson. Most significant, perhaps, the dislike and distrust of him extended beyond politics. As President, Lyndon Johnson would be accused of lying to the American people. When he was a college student, his fellow students... believed not only that he lied to them—lied to them constantly...lied so incessantly that he was, in widely used phrase, "the biggest liar on campus..." (Caro xx)

O'Brien is displaying a common thread of deceit among politicians, particularly the politicians involved in the Vietnam War.

Surprisingly, of the three presidents mentioned in the text, Nixon seems to escape the most scrutiny. Richard Nixon's

name is synonymous in history with the term Watergate, a major incident in U.S. history that set the standard for deceit within politics. He is also the president in office when journalist Seymour Hersh broke the news of My Lai. Initially, Nixon “made a pledge that those responsible would be brought to justice” (Briton and Sim 12). Most politicians were surprised by the public’s response to the massacre. The outrage quickly dissipated and “only weeks later, a *Time* magazine poll showed that 65 percent of Americans thought that incidents like My Lai were ‘bound to happen in war.’ By the time of Lt. Calley’s trial, in 1970, the balsamic attraction of the argument had done much to persuade most Americans that it was wrong to prosecute American soldiers for ‘doing their duty’” (Briton and Sim 12). Later, Nixon was the president that granted the pardon to Lt. William Calley, the only soldier convicted of a crime for the My Lai massacre, after Calley had served only four months in prison. Nixon seemed to make excuses for Calley, and O’Brien again incorporates history into the text:

The point of greatest danger for an individual confronted with a crisis is not during the period of preparation for the battle, not fighting the battle itself, but in the period immediately after the battle is over. Then, completely exhausted and drained emotionally, he must watch his decision most carefully. There is an increased possibility of error because he may lack the necessary cushion of emotional and mental reserve which is essential for good judgment. (*In the Lake* 99-100)

When Calley was released “Judge Robert Elliott...observed: ‘War is war and it’s not unusual for innocent civilians such as the My Lai victims to be killed’” (Briton and Sim 2). After Calley’s release, he gave lectures at universities, married, and took over as manager in a jewelry store in Georgia. O’Brien includes a passing mention of this jewelry store as noted earlier.

If the country is so willing to forget, the next logical question would be, why does O’Brien bother? O’Brien troubles himself with the recreation of history because it is important for the security of humankind’s emotional psyche. This basic

mistrust and obsession with politicians and politics in general affect the nation's emotional well-being and will continue to eat away at humanity. O'Brien writes the entire nation into his text through John Wade:

We moved like sleepwalkers through the empty villages, shadowed by an enemy we could never find... We brutalized. We wasted. We pistol-whipped... In a peculiar way, even at this very instant, the ordeal of John Wade—the long decades of silence and lies and secrecy—all this has a vivid, living clarity that seems far more authentic than my own faraway experience. Maybe that's what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life. (*In the Lake* 298)

O'Brien makes the war vivid for us again through the novel.

The effects of Vietnam were felt in the 1990s and are still being felt today. Author Bruce Franklin echoes this belief:

In the Lake of the Woods does connect to the most essential truths about Vietnam's role in the politics and culture of the nation in the 1980s and 1990s. Just over two years after Kathy and John Wade vanish in fiction, the denial that O'Brien is dramatizing was given its most succinct statement by President George Bush in his inaugural address: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory." (Franklin)

As Franklin says, if all that the American people learned from Vietnam is that we cannot afford to be separated by a memory, then authors like O'Brien have an enormous, if not insurmountable, task in front of them. Deeds like *My Lai* must be remembered in order for politicians and the U.S. Military to maintain their humanity. O'Brien reiterated this point in an interview:

America is not the policeman of the universe, we can't just appoint ourselves as cops... After Vietnam, there was a sense of impotence that swept across the nation and entered into our psyches. We had been the Lone Ranger for so many years, and now we were unmasked. We've wanted to pump iron for so many years, show that we're tough guys, you know,... go into Iraq and kick ass. The Vietnam syndrome. (Edel-

man).

The role of the Vietnam War in O'Brien's novel explores his love of his home country, his guilt for entering the military, and his effort to expose the nation for banishing the evils of war. O'Brien argues that his sins in war are greater than the average soldier because he "entered the military as a 'guilt' (his word), knowing that the war in Viet Nam was 'ill-conceived and morally wrong'" (*Tim O'Brien* 14). The guilt he feels in the novel is reflected through the involvement of his main character, John Wade, in the My Lai Massacre: "'Please,' Sorcerer [Wade] said again. He felt very stupid. Thirty meters up the trail he came across Conti and Meadlo and Rusty Calley. Meadlo and the lieutenant were spraying gunfire into a crowd of villagers. They stood side by side, taking turns. Meadlo was crying. Conti was watching" (*In the Lake* 107). O'Brien includes his main fictional character in a reenactment of an actual war crime committed during the Vietnam War. The only fictional part of the story is the presence of John Wade and the character Richard Thinbill. O'Brien uses the backdrop of the massacre to convey his guilt over the war and to bring attention to atrocities forgotten by the American people. He heightens the fictional/historical moment by including genuine quotes from the trials of William Calley, a soldier convicted of war crimes against the Vietnamese.

O'Brien rewrites history by including the transcripts of another soldier responsible for many deaths in My Lai, Paul Meadlo:

Q: What did you do?

A: I held my M-16 on them.

Q: Why?

A: Because they might attack.

Q: They were children and babies?

A: Yes.

Q: And they might attack? Children and babies?

A: They might've had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have throwed them at us.

Q: Babies?

A: Yes.

Q: Were the babies in their mothers' arms?

A: I guess so.

Q: And the babies moved to attack?

A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.

(In the Lake 136)

To demonstrate O'Brien's goal to be historically accurate, below is the same excerpt from a "historical" source:

Q: What did you do?

A: I held my M-16 on them.

Q: Why?

A: Because they might attack.

Q: They were children and babies?

A: Yes.

Q: And they might attack

A: They might have had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have thrown them at us.

Q: Babies?

A: Yes.

Q: Then why didn't you shoot them?

A: I didn't have no orders to kill them right then.

Q: Why didn't you fire first when Lieutenant Calley said, "I want them dead"?

A: Because Lieutenant Calley started firing first. I don't know why I didn't fire first.

Q: What were the people doing when Lieutenant Calley arrived?

A: They were sitting down.

Q: The women, the children and babies were sitting down?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they attack you?

A: I assumed at every minute that they would counterbalance. I thought they had some sort of chain or a little string they had to give a little pull and they blow us up, things like that.

Q: What did you do?

A: I just watched them. I was scared all the ime.

Q: How many people did you take to the ditch?

A: Seven or eight people...

Q: And it was your job?

A: It was my job, yes.

Q: What were the children in the ditch doing?

A: I don't know.

Q: Were the babies in their mother's arms?

A: I guess so.

Q: And the babies moved to attack?

A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance

Q: Had they made any move to attack?

A: No...

("The My Lai Court-Martial")

The horror of the testimony is an effective reminder of the atrocities that took place. O'Brien intermingles the testimony with quotes from other survivors, public officials, and prominent authors. O'Brien's opinion of these events is reflected again through the voice of his fictional character and the narrator-biographer. He writes, "At the Son My Memorial, which I visited in the course of research for this book, the number is fixed at 504 (Vietnamese killed during My Lai). An amazing experience, by the way. Thuan Yen is still a quiet little farming village, very poor, very remote... The ditch is still there. I found it easily. Just five or six feet deep, shallow and unimposing, yet it was as if I had been there before, in my dreams, or in some other life" (*In the Lake* 146). His anonymous narrator is able to tell the world about the war and expose lies of Wade and politicians without losing track of the historical evidence. O'Brien reiterated the story in his autobiographical piece: "The Army's Criminal

Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison...his ultimate jail time amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison” (“The Vietnam in Me”).

O’Brien admits that personal and historical incidents in his writing “are not only numerous, but they’re also incredibly important in my work: the father theme, the theme of heroism, the theme of history and war, the theme of loneliness and alienation, the theme of the importance of imagination in our lives as a way to escape and to change the world” (*Tim O’Brien* 4). In many ways, the reader is unable to escape the world that O’Brien has created. He does not allow us to dismiss the horror. O’Brien writes, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (*In the Lake* 138). By incorporating history in his fiction he has recreated events for the same purposes as those in the genre of biomythography. He is documenting historical moments to (re)create not so much a chronological reading of historical events, but to establish a cultural history through theme and image. His work “has become the Vietnam literature of record for many students introduced to contemporary war fiction” (Smith 12). O’Brien adds, “In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance” (Smith 15). His objective is to stop the ignorance, and he is doing it through a recreation of history, myth, and biography in fiction.

Section IV: Bringing Biomythography into the Classroom

In the introduction of this essay, I mentioned my experience in an English class in high school. Like O’Brien, I focused on the emotional truth connected to the moment. Darren was in my class and he was quite adorable, but I did not have a crush on him. Mrs. Copperud was my teacher, but I’m not sure if she read O’Brien aloud or not. What is true in the situation is

that Mrs. Copperud introduced me to the author Tim O'Brien, and that moment was a major turning point in my exploration of literature. I read O'Brien's work because he was from my hometown, and I could connect to him in a way that I could not with other authors. I suddenly felt like the world became a place where even small-town kids could succeed, which is an amazing gift to a young adult. For this gift, I am forever grateful to Mrs. Copperud and Tim O'Brien, and I hope this essay will provide a way for other educators to bring him into the classroom.

There are many ways to bring together war literature, Tim O'Brien's work, and an exploration of biography, myth, and history in a pedagogical setting. Tim O'Brien explores the horrible nature of the Vietnam War for a generation of readers who do not know or may not understand that period in America's history. To assist students in comprehending the objective of the author and the full nature of the novel, instructors must address each of the areas of biomythography separately, and this is perhaps best done with the pairing of secondary texts.

The utilization of secondary work in the classroom will be vital for many students' appreciation of the text. When exploring the biographical aspects of O'Brien's work, the first text I suggest reading is his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up And Ship Me Home* and his article, "The Vietnam in Me." These texts will lay the foundation of Tim O'Brien's experience in Vietnam and help students relate to how O'Brien's time in Vietnam coincides with the characters in his novel. I would also recommend reading on-line interviews as well as the biographical information written by Tobey Herzog. Herzog was allowed access to O'Brien that few interviewers have had. His work seems insightful and thorough and explores the nature of O'Brien's childhood. These secondary works help understand not only who O'Brien is, but who John Wade, the main character, is and what role he represents in the novel.

When exploring the mythology of the novel, a discussion of Joseph Campbell's work is a must. A review and definition of the steps (i.e. separation, initiation, and return) will help students understand the concepts of hero and anti-hero in myth. An

instructor may want to explore a piece in which the elements of the hero's journey are more evident, such as *The Odyssey*, and then discuss where those steps are present or subverted in the novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*. Homer's myth could be particularly useful in the exploration of the long war; the estrangement of Odysseus from home involving a ten-year absence, during which his family alternately loses hope in his return or continues to search for clues about him; the home-coming and the purposeful disguise he wears to conceal his identity from those he loves and those who seek to erase him; his sudden exposure of himself to the 108 suitors whom he colludes with the goddess of war and the creative arts to kill; his repatriation with his wife Penelope; and his assumption of his political role as head of the city-state of Ithaca. Each of these elements could be paired with John Wade's journey in O'Brien's novel.

If an instructor chooses to examine the history of the time, the resources are limitless. The "Peers Report" is available on-line, along with transcripts from the My Lai trials. A contemporary documentary called "The Fog of War" focuses on Robert McNamara's role in Vietnam and would be a great book-end to students' research. The "Fog of War" website also includes some truly amazing lesson plans for teachers exploring the history of war. Other fictional stories that examine the emotion of the period are Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*. Phan's stories examine the Vietnam War from the unique perspective of the Vietnamese woman. Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, and Adrienne Rich all explored the Vietnam War through their amazing poetry. The opportunities in poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and film to explore the Vietnam War and Tim O'Brien's connection to the history could go on and on.

If I were teaching this text in a classroom, the writing and discussion of history in the United States would be the biggest link to the text. I would begin with students' journaling what they know and understand to be true about the Vietnam War in American History. The journal could take the form of an ongoing reaction to each text that they are exposed to during the course and could be completed in the form of a written diary or

electronic blog. O'Brien's text is very readable and accessible to students. What they learn from each text and what they will find is historically accurate in a work of fiction may come as a surprise to some. The goal would be for them to understand the value of art in a text like O'Brien's as well as greater understanding of America's role in the Vietnam War.

I would conclude the course or section with an assignment for the student to write an argument synthesis, defending or opposing America's role in the Vietnam War, World War II, or the War in Iraq. The paper would bring together what they have learned, how their views have changed, and what they want as Americans for the future of the United States. There is also an opportunity for a creative paper in this unit. The students could each write their own fictional biomythography, and examine a moment in history that changed the trajectory of their lives. They could incorporate elements of their personal biography, elements of the hero myth, and real quotes or statistics from texts. Each of these ideas is merely a suggestion for a pedagogical approach. Like the available research on Vietnam, the list could go on and on.

In the Lake of the Woods is an opportunity for educators to excite students about art and history. O'Brien offers students a glimpse of how history, biography, myth, and fiction sometimes blur together, how humanity does not always listen to the lessons that history is teaching, and how art offers more than just a way to pass the time. The novel is an excellent way for students to (re) learn history and (re)examine their own concept of fiction and an excellent way for instructors to help students see themselves through biomythography.

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