
Anything You Want: Using Consumerism as a Lens in Teaching and Reading Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

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I feel cheated. I feel let down and betrayed. What happened? I can't make sense of this; why is this story presented as a mystery if we aren't going to be given the ending. There are casualties, here: human, of course—Kathy, John, Private Weatherby, and also my sense of what a novel should be and should do for me—as the reader. All gone, all missing. Though I had been enchanted by the characters, the setting, and the mystery of it all, I still feel an absence. I sure had bought into the story; I was sure that John Wade was innocent. Sure, he had issues, but what fictionalized Vietnam War veteran didn't? Wasn't that the point of the story? He could still be my hero. He could find her. He could explain to her, to us, the truth and all could still turn out well.

This is how I felt the first time that I read Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*. I must have missed some crucial piece of the story that would allow me to solve the mystery on my own. I needed a strategy the next time I read the book. I needed to read closer to the text, and leave some of my expectations behind. I needed to look for the story all through the text, and not wait for the story to complete itself at the end. I needed to read critically for details. I needed to bring myself to the text instead

of expecting the text to come to me. So, I put on my favorite baseball cap, listened to a little Buffalo Springfield (for what it was worth), and settled in.

What I found in that second read was much more detail, though even fewer answers. I was left with more questions and more doubts. And this time *I was sure* that John had done it. How can that happen? How can a novel offer two such very different readings back to back? And, if that was my experience, how on Earth was I supposed to teach this text to my students? And I was pretty stuck on the idea of teaching it. We already owned the books. The teacher before had taught it for several years. It was listed on the syllabus for the course. It was Tim O'Brien, a Minnesota writer. I had several good reasons to teach this text, but I knew that teaching this text was going to challenge me as much as reading it would challenge them. And that was a good feeling. I know now, having taught the text several times, that my students often react the same way; puzzled at first, they learn to read more critically, use lenses to make meaning, and adjust their expectations of the responsibilities of both the author and the reader.

The Setting, the Characters, and the Plot

*“There’s something happening here;
what it is ain’t exactly clear”¹*

College in the Schools: Literature, a concurrent enrollment course through the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, is offered to high-performing juniors and seniors at Irondale High School, in New Brighton, MN, as the capstone honors literature course. For the past 15 years or so, Tim O'Brien's books have been central to the study of literature in this course. *In the Lake of the Woods* and *The Things They Carried* are often taught as a central part of the curriculum in CIS: Lit courses, which are offered throughout the Twin Cities metro area. CIS: Lit students

1 Like the Vietnam War, and now Iraq, history is not clear. Nor is O'Brien's text. Buffalo Springfield sang this song in response to the Vietnam War in "For What it's Worth."

read resistant, difficult, and culturally significant literature. I helped students understand and apply the tenets of critical theory, criticism, and lenses.² *In the Lake of the Woods* offers unique difficulties because of its complexity. Readers find history, evidence, footnotes, prose chapters, and several hypothesis chapters. It does not read like a normal mystery novel. However, this text is very appropriate for high school students, and using “consumerism,” a tenet of postmodernism, is a viable strategy for reading and analyzing this text. Consumerism will give teachers a way to deal not only with the difficulty of the text, but address the thwarted expectations of students, and empower the diversity of opinion that often results from reading and discussing such a challenging text.

In the Lake of the Woods tells the story of John Wade as a child, soldier, spouse, candidate for public office, and a man dealing with love and loss. Wade loses his biological father at an early age: first, to alcoholism and, later, to suicide. As a soldier, he serves in the Vietnam War at its most brutal, and least heroic, time. His service climaxes with his involvement in the massacre at the villages of My Lai. When Wade returns from Viet Nam,³

2 Deborah Appleman (see bibliography) has been a frequent presenter at CIS: Lit workshops and MCTE conferences; her work has been pivotal in shaping workshops, discussions and best practices. At the end, I've included an appendix, with teaching activities that I've used in the classroom, and a bibliography to assist anyone wishing to teach this novel.

3 “Vietnam” and “Viet Nam” are often used to denote the same meaning, but they are not as interchangeable as that. They are synonymous in one regard: both terms refer to a geographical region, drawn by lines on a map or globe. Americans and the western world often use “Vietnam” to denote the country, the people, and the war. To the Vietnamese, Viet is a term that, historically, refers to a certain culture, or tribe, of people. Nam Viet is an ancient term, dating back to 208b.c.e, which refers to their summative community and culture, as much as to the geographical region they inhabited. Dai Viet (sometimes Dai Co Viet) refers to a kingdom, established in 967c.e. after Dinh Bo Linh achieved independence from China in battle. The use of the term Viet Cong and Viet Minh are specific to the military and revolutionary branches of Viet Nam's fight for independence. Viet Minh refers to the communist military branch, specifically of North Viet Nam, initiated and led by Ho Chi Minh. Viet Cong refers to the communist forces operating inside of South Viet Nam during the Vietnam War. Both of these terms still refer to the spirit or “enlightenment” of those involved, not just the government of North Viet Nam.

his relationship with Kathy is renewed and they wed shortly thereafter. Later, Wade runs for political office in Minnesota. Wade's history is told to us in flashbacks and memories; the "action" of the book begins on election night, 1986, with the news that Wade has lost his bid for a seat in the US Senate. Wade is left to sort out his future, outside of politics, and has to reassess every part of his past to make meaning of the present in order to move forward into the future. For the first time, perhaps, Wade is forced to face his life for what it is, authentically--not an ideal political role, or another shape that he can assume. He cannot become just another, politically attractive, copy. The ideal self, the simulacrum presented as the aesthetic, the one which Wade created for himself, no longer offers Wade a refuge from his past. Becoming the copy of a hero, or of a regular Joe, is common in politics today.

In the Lake of the Woods is America's story, as much as it purports to be Wade's. It is a quest for truth and, yet, John Wade's truth hides inside of a magician's trick, lies buried in a ditch in Viet Nam, and sinks under 100 feet of cold Canadian water. However, it is not only the quest for truth that drives our intense desire for comprehending this text—we also pursue the innate, consummate desire to “get something out of” our reading, as if there were a hidden grail to be achieved. But, O'Brien won't give us a straight story; he confounds the narrative flow with intratextual interruptions to the plot and character development. He disrupts our understanding by offering more than one way the story could have happened. He offers evidence that is uncertain, untrustworthy. Yet, we continue reading a text which at once invites us to the mystery and yet confounds our expectation for any satisfactory or even literal unveiling of the solution. Instead, the text offers us a partial history of Wade's failed quest for truth from a very foggy past. Our reading parallels this failure. O'Brien even tells the reader, clearly, that the truth will never be achieved by collecting evidence within the text: “Evidence is not truth. It is only evident . . . if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book (30). O'Brien is giving fair warning; there is no

controlling the text, here; readers will have to look elsewhere if they seek a singular and fabricated truth.

But *In the Lake of the Woods* offers far more to the reader than Wade's dramatized search for a lost father or the story of a veteran seeking redemption for thankless service in Viet Nam--it is also the story of how Wade mediates life experience through the postmodern architecture of *Consumerism*.⁴ a philosophical mediation based upon cost/benefit analysis often used to describe "value" in capitalist markets (Jameson 197). Wade's attempt at understanding and creating the "meaning of his life" is dialectical: he wishes to efface any moral judgment or implication stemming from history (costs) that could mar his current reality (benefits) in the present. In the text itself, Wade applies this concept by using numbers and equations to express the "summative value" of his desire: his sense of responsibility to government; his loving feelings for his fiancé; his enduring memories of an alcoholic father; his overpowering guilt; his lust for escape from the negative experiences and emotions piled up in his unconscious mind. This text offers an intense study of character—and not only Wade's character, but the character of past and present history, past and current government, businesses and ventures, citizens and, most of all, the character of readers. To carry the argument to students, teachers must present the bare essentials of the connection of Consumerism to the war in Viet Nam.

4 I use the term "consumerism" as a flexible variant of Jameson's postmodern theory of late capitalism. He sees a radical distinction between the "option" of viewing late capitalism as a cultural dominant (aesthetic or stylistic), and of determining its moral implications, albeit indifferent to either a positive or negative outcome, historically. Simplified, I choose to understand Jameson's option as a choice between "what we accept because of what it looks like (appearance)" or "what we accept because of what it is (essence)." Other critical lenses parallel this dialectic of opposition: Freud's model of latent and manifest; surface and depth; authenticity and simulacra; alienation and inclusion; the signifier and the signified.

The Readers

*“When you see the Southern Cross for the first time
You understand now why you came this way
‘Cause the truth you might be runnin’ from is so small
But it’s as big as the promise, the promise of a comin’ day”⁵*

Like Wade, we also live in denial about the war in Iraq. We allow our government, our media, and ourselves the luxury to bury the horrifying events at My Lai, the real war, in favor of an ideal and aesthetic war, fought for freedom and democracy. The war in Iraq is a copy of the previous war, fought for the simulacra, rather than the authenticity of the event. Lest we forget our past, the Viet Nam War was fought for the sake of ensuring the survival of US Capitalism in Southeast Asia. After World War II, Viet Nam was split into two countries: North Viet Nam, which adopted the principles of Marxism for its ideology; and South Viet Nam, a country infused by Franco-European Capitalism. Although we often describe the South’s leadership as democratic, the actual form of government only existed as much as its leaders promoted colonial style trade and allegiance to the Western Powers in Europe and the USA.

As the French involvement in Viet Nam’s civil war lessened and America’s grew, the doctrine fed to soldiers and the American public was one of stopping the spread of Communism—in effect, ridding the world of Evil. If we substitute Iraq for Viet Nam, and Terrorism for Communism, we have a nearly perfect simulacrum. The doctrine pushed by the US government and profiteering businesses promoted a culture of fear and hatred toward anything Marxist, Socialist or Communist, because of its inherent evil. The evil, of course, is in Communism’s complete eradication of the ideals of Capitalist venture within the structure

5 Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young were not really singing about Viet Nam, but the Southern Cross. This constellation much talked about in Viet Nam memoirs, evokes an eerie image of leaving one hemisphere for the other, of life changing because of one’s position on the globe of the world. The truth that Wade is running from could be the truth we all run from, though the sun continues to rise, and the new day begins.

of society, the use of natural resources, and the uses of labor.⁶ Students may not have this background knowledge, or may only recognize some part of this story from American History courses which usually promote only the American Grand Narrative of “rescuing” the beneficial and free way of life that Communist North Viet Nam would sooner destroy. This is also the Grand Narrative that Wade “signs on” to fight for in Viet Nam.

Because of its unique approach to telling a war story (the one in Viet Nam *and* the one fought within John Wade), and its beguiling retelling of the American Grand Narrative of war, O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods* has always intrigued me. My sense of logic is continually upbraided by the text’s ambiguity, the author’s muddy path towards resolution, the search for a truth that can never be rescued from the dark fog of guilt and forgetting. Yet, it also tickles my sense of possibility, not only in its story, but in *the way that the story unfolds*. The sense of possibility raised by the black words on the white pages. The sense of mystery at my fingertips, but elusive to the grasp. Upon each reading, I feel fundamental truth lurking somewhere behind the ink, and under the white of the page, waiting to be plucked or plumbed. Yet, after long inspection, the truth remains unknowable. The grail remains unachievable. The fallibility of my humanness, the lingering complaint of my curiosity, the deprived and depraved need of surety and truth in a story, becomes the constant weakness of my own character. I am left with the absence of feeling that I “got something out of” my reading, that my time and effort to read and analyze the text were somehow worthwhile. I want answers. I want instant gratification. Yet, this text constantly pushes back. The harder I try to control the

6 Several sources corroborate and debate the ideas in this paragraph. For a diversity of opinion, see *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* by Neil Sheehan (1989) and *Vietnam: A History* by Stanley Karnow (1983). Students may feel the need for a coherent narrative of the war; however, the opinions on the Viet Nam war are as varied as the opinions on politics today. What becomes truth depends much upon *who* gets to tell the story. Isn’t it interesting that readers so desire a singular truth, as if there were such a thing, for questions concerning the past? And so desire individual choice and flexibility in the present?

text, the less cooperation I find. I have a hard time letting go and drifting along with the story, whether I understand the direction or not. Control is a common method of reading. My students are not unlike me in trying to control a text. When they cannot, they simply lose interest. The book is “no good.”

I teach at Irondale High School, a medium sized school in the suburbs of the Twin Cities. We have several gifted students, or “customers,” who elect to “buy our goods” by registering for honors courses. Most students choose literature courses because they enjoy the “consumption” of literature. And, after all my years of teaching, I can’t recall just how many times, after assigning any literary text, I have heard students complain: “I don’t like it. I hate it. I didn’t get it. I don’t understand what the author is trying to say. I don’t get the author’s point. Can’t you just tell us what you want us to get out of this book? What’s going to be on the test?” It all boils down to the same complaint: “I am not getting what I bargained for in reading this text.” Students could just as well be saying, “I’m not getting my fair reward for spending time on this book.” Even when students really enjoy reading, the reward often means “I want the author to do the work for me.” It does not seem to matter whether the text is three pages long, three hundred, or a thousand—the reaction can be the same. The intensity of the reaction, however, seems to correlate with the amount of time and pages consumed in the effort to comprehend and understand the assigned material.

I hear this complaint far less when students choose their own books, which suggests that ownership of the “consumerist transaction” changes the engagement of the student during the process of consumption. For students, *to own* the task, or the responsibility, often creates its own consumerist meaning outside of the text. This meaning does not always correlate to our goals and outcomes, as teachers, when choosing literary works to use in our courses. When a teacher assigns a text, students’ expectations should rise exponentially, not drop off.

These are typical feelings when students are assigned texts which resist inactive and complacent readers, such as Tim O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*. Even if the background

information is covered well, when the text is difficult or opaque, when the text pushes back, students rarely feel that they have received a fair payout—or gotten a good deal for trading their most precious commodity: time and effort. This reaction seems perfectly normal to me; these students have grown up in the age of Jameson’s Late Capitalism, or what I will call Postmodern Consumerism. They are surrounded with images of buying power, or “buy-in” power. Advertising is full of it. Teachers even use this language in their planning and teaching: “how do we get students to ‘buy into’ this text?” The process students use to read and understand is intensively linked to their consumerist behavior and ideology. All behavior is transactional. All thinking is transactional. “If I do this, what do I get out of it? If I do what is required, will I get what I want?”

Outside education, this type of consumerism has direct linkage to our government’s “selling” of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars to the American public. “Food for Oil” is a popular slogan—a pithy phrase which encapsulates an ideology that most Americans believe they understand without any further explanation. If I get something out of it, it’s worth the time and expense. However, such simplistic transactional thinking, and brief mottos, short-circuits critical thinking; the ideology ceases to be original and authentic, and is instead replaced by “bumper sticker” simulacra, the casual acceptance of popular opinion in place of finding and expressing our own voices—finding refuge within the masses, instead of learning to think for ourselves. For teachers, this oversimplification of our goals for teaching students to read literature, as specified in the “buy in” type of planning, represents our wrong thinking. Teachers should help students understand their consumerist behavior, not cater to it.

Our students may not even be aware of their immediate, knee-jerk, consumerist reaction to the world. What students do know is their own very real, very physical involvement with currency, with work, with buying, with selling, and the power that comes with the right to purchase most goods for sale--as long as they have the required amount of time and money. They know that a free market economy offers choices, that there is power in

“ownership,” and that ownership can be transferred. They know that there will always be more to buy, that goods have value even after they have been consumed, and that being a “good consumer” goes hand in hand with living in a “good economy.” Economic stimulus checks, eBay, garage sales, taxes, user fees, sales, BOGO sales or 2-for-1 sales: examples surround us continually.

To our students, these concepts are not far removed from the ideologies that sent us to war—and, in fact, are an absolute part of freedom and democracy. In fact, talk of freedom and democracy usually clouds any individual’s economic involvement in wars, or the economic support of unfriendly nations, by offering us less expensive choices at the market, or by placing the market in a context far removed from the source of goods—their own neighborhoods. These are the ideas that students carry forward in their process of reading, into the text of *In the Lake of the Woods*. There is plenty of fertile ground for discussion about how students perceive the very nature of their own ideals—including loss, war, marriage, love, politics—and how their behaviors help them to achieve these ideals or weaken their ability to carry them out.

A Consumerist Reading

“You can get anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant”

Without going on and on about the voodoo of economics, it is important to focus on the outcome of consumerist reading. When students read the material and then come to class and complain that they “didn’t get anything out of it, the normal

7 “*Excepting Alice*.” Arlo Guthrie’s talking ballad, “Alice’s Restaurant,” is based upon a true story. This song tells the story of a young man answering to “the draft board.” This became an anthem for hippies questioning our involvement in Viet Nam. It’s interesting that the chorus lyric is consumerist—Guthrie is pointing out the absurdity of getting “*anything you want*” when the military draft required soldiers to “sign up—or else.” In the song, Guthrie’s persona tells listeners that he wants to go to Viet Nam, wants to “burn women, kids, houses and villages” and “*KILL, KILL, KILL!*” But, because the recruit has a criminal record (for littering) and may therefore lack moral character and fortitude, the army will not allow the recruit to join up.

reading transaction has failed. There is no paycheck for their working hours. This “consumerist transaction,” involving both an input and an output, is a common expectation for our students. The transaction will go like this: Student A invests time to read the text; Student A makes the effort to comprehend and understand the text; Student A gains a reward. In mathematical terms, we can assign the value as a summation of the parts: $x + y = z$, where x is the time, y is the effort, and z is the reward. It is important to see the essence of the individual transaction as a “buy-in” and the reward results from the expectation from that buy-in. John Wade also uses this type of transaction to assess the value of his relationships, his career, and his father’s love, which I’ll discuss later.

Teachers also use consumerist ideals to help express our goals. But, from a teacher’s viewpoint, what is the “buy-in”? What are we asking students to do? We ask them to value what we value. We are asking them to become citizens of our economic culture. We ask them to be “productive.” We ask students to invest in ideals that may not be of their own choosing. Like taxes, or retirement accounts, or preventative maintenance on a car, we ourselves, perhaps, don’t want to invest in these, but know we must to become and remain members of the consumerist community we must compete within. To ease the distaste, we often tell ourselves that these things are for our own good, that they create a better society in which to live, or that we are taking care of our own future.

Our students can be a tougher sell. With them, the buy-in is much different. We look for ways to hook *their* interest, *their* appreciation, *their* sense of value. But this is wrong thinking on our parts. Essentially, if we believe that students can be bribed by something that they value, for treading the waters of what we value, we are not asking them to buy in permanently. We are not giving them the skills to think for themselves, for the sake of learning, for the sake of curiosity. Consumerist behavior in teachers is a slippery slope; students only learn that the rewards for reading are external to the reading process itself.

Instead, teach them to read critically. Teach them to see

analytically. Do not give them the answers: teach them about themselves; teach them to think. Ask what they see in the text. Ask them to make connections. Show them your love of reading; don't bribe them with the film or free time at the end of class.

Students are asked to do work; the task is set. We may offer skills or ideas that give them power in the market place, whether that place is our classroom, on a test, in their own lives, or in their academic or work futures. Or we may offer something more immediate—free time, extra credit, or a passing grade. But students often see right through these attempts at bribery. They accept these offers, or not, based upon how much they value the consumerist transaction, and ultimately, upon *who they are*. Eleven-year-old John Wade certainly does see through, and still accept, the bribery of his father. Wade's father purchases John's affection with an offer to buy a magical item for him at Christmas. John, as a child, finds excitement and intense value in this because John is a consumer of magical items. During his visits to Karra's Studio of Magic, Wade sees the power that "magic" can offer, first through his sense of possibility at the purchase point of the items, and second, as the power of possibility that John can actually make magic happen—he can access a skill that he will use often in his future, making himself magically disappear.

There is a slight variation of the consumerist transaction. The input is Wade's collection of magic items, combined with the effort involved in his rehearsals in the basement in front of the mirror, and the reward is the power that magic can give him. John's transaction is documented in the prose chapters, when John and his father are Christmas shopping at Karra's, and in the evidence chapters through quotations from Robert Parrish's *The Magician's Handbook*. And this is another example of how O'Brien gives us a variety of views stemming from the variety of texts which he gives to the reader. Like Wade, students need to enter these texts, as well as that of the novel, in order to make meaning of the mystery.

The consumerist nature of the transactional formula oc-

curs when Wade's father tells John to buy "Anything you want Break the bank" (69). This transaction offers Wade a reward intrinsically different, a reward above the simple "money for goods" formula—this transaction offers John a chance at being a good son, perhaps, for putting up with his father's absences, alcoholic behaviors and abuses. This formulation is harder to chart out mathematically than the $x + y = z$ equation above, and will look like this—John Wade puts in time physically as a son and understands his father and the ways in which he fits the definitions of "son"—John understands how he is and isn't defined by his father (x); Wade expends effort practicing and understanding magic (y); the reward, in this case, is not only the goods, but how these magical goods can be used to both impress and abuse his father (z).

The bribery backfires; John sees through his father's trick and turns affection to disdain. The reward John chooses is the Guillotine of Death. He wants to perform the trick on his father's arm, to seemingly cut it off at the wrist. "Go on," the Carrot Lady says, "Let him have it" (71). John certainly receives a special reward from this transaction: the satisfaction of being in control, for once, of his father's emotions, instead of the other way around; a release, if even for a short time, from being controlled by his conflicted feelings for his father. Perhaps John wants to frighten or enrage his father, perhaps as payback for what his father has done to him. The text allows the reader to draw an individual conclusion concerning this power play, but by applying the transactional model, the reader acknowledges the dysfunctional relationship between father and son, acknowledges that what appears to be a kindness becomes a trigger for abuse. "Power: that was the thing about magic" (71). This consumerist relationship with his father becomes a hearkening to John Wade—and Wade later uses mathematics to describe his success and failure in politics and to illustrate and analyze his feelings about Kathy.

Politics are a risky business. So much depends upon public opinion as an indicator of success or failure. It's no secret that public opinion polls drive decisions at all political and social

levels, and no secret that politicians pay attention to polls as if they held the ultimate truth of life. Perhaps that is what attracts Wade to politics in the first place—give Sorcerer the chance to “cash in” on his service in Viet Nam, the chance to erase his history and magically change into the person he wants to become. For acceptance. For Wade, “politics was just a love thermometer. The polls quantified it, the elections made it official (55). Sorcerer uses his magic—and his mathematical formulas—which empirically express a rational truth that others consume and digest without trouble. Formulas can express a certain brand of factual truth, can entertain a certain “spin,” without revealing true thoughts and feelings. “Politics *was* manipulation. Like a magic show: invisible wires and secret trapdoors” (35).

Political polls, at best, can reveal generality and uncover tendencies; yet these same polls often purport to offer solid evidence. However, polls rely upon a system of standard deviations, a margin of error that creates a shadow of uncertainty and leaves a place within the truth where secrets can hide. A place where, even if the numbers were right, the truth could still hide. A place, like My Lai, where majority rules, yet individual behavior can be hidden. A place where the killing of Weatherby is two stories, but one story falls into the shadows, magically disappears, within the standard deviation of the mean. Perhaps in this way, politics also offer Wade a refuge where tendencies can be counted on, and individual acts are submerged. Wade believes that he can be anybody, as long as others accept its truth—enough collective truth that he could abdicate individual responsibility—and become anybody he wants to be. Tony Carbo says that, for Wade, “politics and magic were almost the same thing for him. Transformations—” (27).

But the magic and shadows eventually betray Wade. Wade loses the primary by a landslide. A close political race is somehow worthy of respect, but a landslide is a complete and total consumerist ruin. What begins as a simple failure, a flawed formula, ends in a landslide failure, a complete erasure from both politics and love, and perhaps, a total landslide into the watery depths of nonexistence. The numbers do not lie; there are no

overlapping shadows to allow uncertainty, especially within the standard deviation. Losses may leave a bitter taste, but do not choke like a landslide. John and Kathy “pretended things were not so bad. The election had been lost, but they tried to believe it was not the absolute and crushing thing it truly was” (2).

Wade also uses mathematics to define the nature of his relationship with Kathy. John met Kathy in 1966. “The trick then was to make her love him and never stop” (32). When he can’t trust love to last, he begins spying on her, stalking her. He needed to make sure that Kathy fit into his plan for life: “First law school, he told her, then a job with the party, and then, when all the pieces were in place, he’d go for something big. Lieutenant governor, maybe. The US Senate” (34). His desires are expressed through a series of mathematical equations: $a + b + c + d = \text{love and acceptance}$. It was magic, yet it was calculable, mathematically sound. Kathy wonders: “You’ve figured everything out, all the angles, but what’s it *for*?”

“For us,” he says. “I love you, Kath” (35).

Like a kid, John labels their love on her tennis shoe: “with a ballpoint pen he wrote on the instep: JOHN + KATH. He drew a heart around these words, tied the shoe to her foot” (60). Wade uses another mathematical equation to describe their love. Funny, though, Wade doesn’t directly tell us what it equals, but usually the equation ends with =LOVE. In this case, we are left to speculate. These types of consumerist equations, the nature of the language that O’Brien uses, have great depth as tools to open up the text for us; we can use these consumerist metaphors to discuss the nature of our own feelings. What metaphor would I use to describe my own feelings of love? How would I “sum up” the goals for my own life? Like Wade, do metaphors offer us some kind of magic, or the language of magic, to make our desires come true?

Wade finds other ways to describe their love while he is in Viet Nam. He “compare[s] their love to a pair of snakes he’d seen along the trail, in Pinkville, each snake eating the other’s tail” (61). Wade hypothesizes that if the snakes continue eating each other, the “mathematics get weird” and this mathematical

strangeness can be captured by this sublime formula: “one plus one equals zero” (61). What at first seems flirtatious in Wade’s letter home to Kathy, silly lover’s talk or nonsensical romanticism, becomes a sort of consumerist mantra for Wade. In later letters home from Viet Nam, Wade continues to reference these snakes as an intense, operative metaphor for their love. In a strictly consumerist rendering, though, this mathematical formula does not compute.

The result of Wade’s formula is zero; unless we are missing the meaning of “zero,” there appears to be no reward. Is it possible that Wade sees their love, not as consumerist, but as something that cannot be bought by or sold to the highest bidder? Or bedder? Or flatterer? Or Sorcerer? Is it possible that the computation of time plus effort can result in no reward and still be satisfactory? At the core, there is a sublimity to be discovered; perhaps love cannot be described in mathematical terms, no matter how many times Wade repeats this formula. Perhaps he seeks no reward from his efforts. But this is not in keeping with the Wade whose every move is calculated to get him elected to the US Senate, to get him married to Kathy, to cover up or remove any record of his involvement in My Lai. And, calculated enough, toward the end of the novel, to remove any record of his connection with Kathy’s disappearance, or perhaps even to remove him from his own life? At the end of it all, Wade is a casualty of faulty mathematics, a broken narrative, a buried truth, and a sunken confidence in his ability to change anything.

A Final Assessment

*“And, in the end, the love you take is equal
to the love you make.”⁸*

We will never know more than what is in the text. And that is reason enough to use this text with our students. We can

⁸ Is it really? What would Wade have said about this equation? Or Kathy? Perhaps even the Beatles recognized the consumerist nature of love. This lyric appears at the end of “The End” on *Abbey Road*.

only rely on the tools we bring into the text, to open up the mystery. We can only rely on the possibilities we generate as individuals, as a class, as a community. There is a reason why Wade focuses so heavily upon the zero in this equation. And we must speculate on the nature of numbers to truly describe emotions. This formula has merits as a metaphor—a metaphor that hints at the truth—but this formula is a metaphor for failure, not for love or success. The formula is flawed from the beginning. The math does not work. The numbers do not compute. And, in many ways, Wade is a zero, to us. As the narrator says, “John Wade—he’s beyond knowing. He’s an other.” No matter how much we crave to know Wade, or know one another, it is prone to failure. to “penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that encase the human spirit, [they] define it, and guard it, and hold it forever inaccessible . . . Our lovers, our husbands, our wives, our fathers, our gods—they are all beyond us” (101).

Yet, there is value in considering this formula further, but not for Wade’s or Kathy’s sake. If we consider our consumerist students, and apply this formula to the *process* they use to read text, the formula can be used to describe feelings that students may encounter when their time and effort comes to naught at the end of the text—when they never find out “whodunit.” There is no reward for reading the text as a mystery, as a story, as a way to discern reality at the conclusion. “ $1 + 1 = 0$ ” leaves them empty of compassion for Wade, for Kathy, for O’Brien—and for me for assigning such a text. However, when the formula for the normal reading process is thwarted, the greater reward is possible. Who hasn’t learned more from mistakes? Who hasn’t discovered something important along the road not taken?

Often, students are disappointed that O’Brien does not give them a viable, logical answer to the mystery. “What happened?” They are less than satisfied. I ask them, “What do you think happened?” The answers are varied: I don’t know. I think he did it. I think they went away to Verona. I think she drowned. He lets himself die because he feels guilty for not protecting her. Kathy escapes, but John dies. And my consol-

ing does little good to those who feel cheated. When I tell them, “this book is about *you*,” their looks betray their disgust with my answer. I try again. “If you think Wade did it, that is *who you are*. If you choose to believe they made it to Verona, *that is who you are*.”

Although some students see the possibilities, ready to give anything a go, it still comes up zero. The buy-in that teachers often crave results in null. But all is not lost, for in that nullity lies an essential lesson, not only in literary terms, but in *who they are*. The discussion can turn away from the author, or the characters, and focus on students--as readers and consumers. We have the chance to teach them something that they can use in every arena of their lives. To me, it is the English teacher’s Holy Grail, to teach them an essential truth transcending literature, a truth never to forget, not facts or lies that they will never use again after the final test. They read themselves as much as they read the novel. Perhaps, it could be stated as such: “the meaning that you take is equal to the meaning that you make.”

Turning aside from Wade, the focus can be brought to capitalism and our Grand American Narrative of consumption and *how that affects how we value stories and the way we read literature*. Few students feel that a zero sum transaction is advantageous in a free market world, whether we are talking about reading, relationships, or the summation of goods or ideas. To get something for nothing is a good deal, but to get nothing for something is simply ridiculous to a consumer. And I do mean ridicule is the natural outcome. In a scene from *Forrest Gump*, Forrest spends thousands of dollars on a barely seaworthy shrimping boat. Even the seller sees a disconnect between the boat’s value and the extremely high price Gump is willing to pay. The seller replies, “Are ya’ stupid or something?” Gump does not see the zero sum formula at work, though we do. He pays too much for the boat, and the formula turns into a great loss. We laugh. But, through the magic of story, Gump actually ends up a billionaire precisely because of his ignorance and that lopsided transaction. It is ironic, the great literary equalizer. Forrest Gump only sees the reward and does not understand the

summative values; he does not understand life through consumerist principles.

But students fail to see reward in their own lives when it is not immediate. They have a hard time recognizing their own role in the post-modern consumerist economic reality that we inhabit. They are not fully fledged members of the economic reality that is America. Unless the discussion is fruitful, and focuses on their reality, reading O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* can be a failure, a zero sum. Students will quickly lose interest, respect, and motivation. But, by recognizing their role in reading this text, students can reap much more from their experience. O'Brien continually reminds readers of their role in this text. And, in terms of teacher planning, goals and outcomes, losing readers does not compute in the classroom.

If we use this consumerist principle to describe our students, then this transaction must describe not only their active intuition concerning priorities in their lives, but also their unconscious desires. Many students will accept assignments without groaning, and some fully look forward to the challenge and reward that comes with such work. When assigning O'Brien's text, I am acutely aware that the text may not offer that great reward at the end, in the usual way, but the challenge is worthy—even though the author hauntingly dismisses the possibility of such a reward as *full comprehension and understanding*. O'Brien's narrator alerts readers to the idea that the mystery may never be solved through reading this book. At the bottom of page 30, the narrator tells us that “Kathy Wade is forever missing, and if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book.”⁹ What kind of a mystery novel offers no solution at the end of the book? Why does O'Brien seem to sabotage the suspense, and his seeming intention of delivering a

9 One incredibly rich exception to this experience is the reader who refuses to read all the footnotes, or perhaps skips the evidence chapters altogether believing they are erroneous to the story. Some students have told me of having to go back and read the skipped evidence chapters after seeing them subsequently appear in later chapters and realizing their integral role in the story.

mystery? Everything in this text casts an accusing finger back towards the reader.

By using the consumerist formula in class discussions, the empty experience of the reader can be mediated and described. One plus one equals zero. If a student puts in the time, and the effort, and no reward is forthcoming (the zero sum effect), that student may feel disappointed by the text, may feel they missed something and, therefore, the time and effort were wasted on an insolvable text, or worse, may feel that the entire reading process was “not worth their time and money.” Do we really want our students associating a lack of value with reading? With the meaning of literature? With the meaning of life?

When using resistant texts in the classroom, and it is necessary to do so, it is a teacher’s responsibility to help students work through their feelings of being unrewarded, especially when students are demanding and academically focused. Grade is always a consideration; but, notwithstanding, students are also disappointed in the teacher, *in you*, for assigning such a seemingly empty task. Helping them understand their consumerist tendencies, the input and output of the transaction (of reading in this case), softens their initial feelings of having wasted time, wasted effort, and gives them a sense of reward. We must help them understand what they get out of resistant texts, and perhaps all texts: *themselves*. That is the most important knowledge we can give them. An understanding of why they feel this way mediates negative feelings, mediates the post-modern principles at work in their everyday lives, and allows teachers a forum to introduce the higher outcomes of reading any text—the power of story, the power of the printed word, the power of communication, the power to see through the post-modern reality they inhabit, and, most importantly, to realize that the power resides within their own hands.

Hopefully, by accepting that power and the responsibility that comes with it, students reading any resistant text, fiction or other, won’t rely so heavily upon the author, or narrator, to do their work for them. I believe O’Brien, in all sublimity, would certainly agree with that sentiment. Besides, given the anonym-

ity of O'Brien's narrator, why should we trust him? Why should we trust anyone, whom we have never met, and know so little about, to tell us anything resembling truth? We should never purchase a used car without kicking the tires a few times, so why are we so disappointed when O'Brien's narrator turns out to be selling us a lemon of a story? Ask students to kick the tire a few times. Ask them to open the hood, run their fingers along the underbody, and check the fenders for rust or new paint. Uncover whatever truths they can find before making a decision. Our job, in working with this text, is to show students that the math does not always compute--not in this text and not in this life. Teach them that rewards can be accessed through analyzing the derivatives within the equation, without even waiting for the computation.

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Appendix: Teaching Activities

So, what can teachers do in the classroom to help students see themselves in this text? Below are several activities I have used with students while studying this text. I won't claim that these activities will work for you, but each served a specific purpose within my classroom. I am, of course, lucky to have a very collaborative team of teachers to work with in my building.

And, I am indebted to all the teachers and professors who have helped me along the way to becoming the intellectual risk-taker that I am today.

1) Ask Students to Write Daily Journals

It is essential that students keep a journal during their reading. Any kind of journal is helpful, whether it be the two column journal, Cornell notes, or any other such structure. About half the time I ask them to respond to specific topics or questions. Students should record their thoughts, jot out any clues, which help them understand the text, or write about themselves and address reading behaviors that feed their reading process. I tend toward Reader Response when assigning or working with journals in the classroom. One of my favorite journals is to ask students to describe the place where they usually read. Often, it is their bedroom, late at night, TV or Radio on, a low watt reading lamp, and while texting on their cell phone. That is a great place to start talking about lenses. And with this text, any start is a good start. You can't ask too specific a question. Students will have something to offer. And journals help students prepare for class discussions. I usually start class discussions with five minutes of "journal-sharing." Students share journals with each other before the discussion gets going. It provides ample ammunition for the discussion at large.

2) Read Interviews with Tim O'Brien

Several are available, but not all are helpful. Be wary: O'Brien can be just as cryptic, literarily, in an interview, lecture or essay, as in his novels. He has been known to tell a story to his audience or interviewer that may digest as truth, yet it is not. It may be another of his metaphoric fictions, designed *to bring us* to our truth, not necessarily to reveal his own. I would suggest starting with these three sources, which particularly connect to his Viet Nam novels and his experiences during that time in his life. These sources are fully cited in the Bibliography below:

"The Magic Show" is an essay that directly examines O'Brien's craft and the nature of fiction and mystery in any text.

Although O'Brien makes several comments on the inability of ever discovering the truth, this article can be applied to *In the Lake of the Woods* because its central metaphor--that creating fiction is the act of creating a magic show--is useful to students as an analytical tool and as a primary tool to assess the nature of truth in any text, fiction or not. O'Brien plumbs the paradox that "there is something both false and trivial about a story that arrives at absolute closure." In other words, perhaps we shouldn't trust any story that wraps up easily and completely, leaving no questions in its wake.

"The Vietnam in Me" is essentially autobiographical. This article was released on the eve of the publication of *In the Lake of the Woods* and reveals "the truth" of O'Brien's service in Viet Nam: the lingering pain, the post-traumatic stress, the anxiety, loneliness, and despair. "You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam" seems to sum up his main point. Students will find this article to help them understand the responsibility of history to reveal truth.

"Writing Vietnam" is a lecture. This particular piece is noteworthy because of O'Brien's bold paradoxical statement that all fiction writing, even when it purports to be autobiographical, is for "getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth." O'Brien develops two components for creating truth in history for our modern society. Besides documenting historical truth, there is a need to develop the sensation *that one was actually there*, and this can be accomplished through narrative fiction. The past can strike as forcefully in the present when the reader feels the authentic experience, the sense that some answers and truths may never be discovered. Therefore, *In the Lake of the Woods* cannot conclude as a story, but must continue because it is no longer the story of John Wade; it is our story.

3) Learn About the History and the War in Viet Nam

Our history textbooks do not do the job when it comes to this war. I would start by educating yourself, as teacher. You need to take the lead. Watch films, but not necessarily the fictionalized films such as *Casualties of War*, or *Platoon*, but these

films can open up a window for students on what war might be like. Instead, go to the news reel type films created by the History Channel, by American News Network Television, or by organizations outside of the United States for a more objectified version of the truth as presented. The Internet is full of websites, interviews, and electronic sources about the Vietnam War. Selected bibliographies for Tim O'Brien are also plentiful. Many of the sources that I mentioned above are available on the web. Some, however, such as the *New York Times*, require accounts and/or subscriptions.

I would like to point out one consideration. Our students (and some of our teachers) have had very little coursework in the Vietnam War era of history. I would suggest having students do some background reports or class presentations on the Viet Nam war era prior to reading any of O'Brien's Vietnam War books: *In the Lake of the Woods*, *The Things They Carried*, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, or *Going After Cacciato*. I've previously cited two sources in a previous footnote that teachers should consult. There are several good memoirs available, as well, from both soldiers and citizens, from the United States and from Viet Nam. Several works of fiction are also available.

One book, later made into a riveting film, is excellent: *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1985). The film was released in 1988 and is readily available for purchase and rental online.

Students may also be interested in the vocabulary and slang used in the Vietnam War. Note: some of the language is coarse. This link will bring them to it: <http://www.vietvet.org/glossary.htm>

Here is a link to a pretty complete history lesson plan, developed by students: <http://www.wisd.us/departments/hist-grant/Lesson%20Plans/vietnam.htm>

4) Give Students Criticism to Read

Start with O'Brien's works, but continue giving theory and lens work to students. Deborah Appleman's text (cited below) has been invaluable. Any lens will work, but I tend to use

Reader Response to open up discussions early in the semester, and rely on that lens to open up the text in their journals and in our earliest discussions. Then, later in the semester, and later in each novel unit, I move away from Reader Response toward Structuralist, Deconstruction, Genderist, and Postmodernist lenses. Timothy Melley's work on trauma and historical forgetting (cited below) was also indispensable to understanding O'Brien's Vietnam War novels.

5) Invite Speakers in to Your Classroom

It is quite possible that your students have relatives who served in the war, either as a soldier in the US Armed Services or the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam. There are also many civilians from America or Viet Nam who have stories to tell. However, make sure you talk to any potential speakers before they enter your classroom and face the students and their questions. The Vietnam War was very emotional for those who served and for those who were affected by it, personally. If you have no connections, contact veterans groups in your city or state. Many of these groups have speakers who are experienced at speaking to groups and are willing to come to your school and talk to students. To start, you may want to contact the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, or your statewide Vietnam Veterans group. Most of these organizations can be found in the phone book or on the web.

6) Visit "The Wall" — Virtually, in Your Classroom

Look at this link: <http://www.vvmf.org>.

This link has information and promos for a well made film which tells the history of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial: http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/site/smithsonian/show_remember_vietnam.do

Look for films about the wall. This is our lasting connection to those soldiers whose "certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons," as O'Brien puts it in "Writing Vietnam." This one is particularly interesting and tells about artifacts left at the wall by visitors: *Letters to the Wall: A Documentary on the*

Vietnam Wall Experience (2002).

7) Bring in Songs and Pop Culture from that Era

Some students know the music from the sixties and seventies, but few realize the connection with the war and the peace movement. It's sometimes shocking for students to see that "The Ballad of the Green Berets" reached the number one spot on the Billboard Charts for five weeks in 1966, the same year that "Alice's Restaurant" was released. I've used songs as subtitles within my paper, but there are many that protest our involvement in Viet Nam: some use metaphors, and some are outright hostile about the effects of the war on our culture. Ask students to make these connections to O'Brien's text. There are also films that use music from this era; *Apocalypse Now* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) is one of the best examples. To illustrate some of the differences between the peace movement then and now, ask students to bring in songs that protest our involvement in Iraq. You can even ask students to write a protest song.

Two examples of pop culture items from this time are POW bracelets and Zippo brand cigarette lighters. Both are well documented on the web. POW bracelets are still available through veterans groups, and include soldiers from all modern wars as well. The bracelets have names of MIAs or POWs inscribed upon them. Once the soldier was returned, the wearer was supposed to mail the bracelet to the family of the soldier. Zippo lighters are still highly collectible—especially if they are engraved with a soldier's military insignia and branch or area of service during the war. Besides being used to light cigarettes (many soldiers smoked), Zippo lighters were collected by soldiers for "Zippo Missions"—which were Search and Destroy missions which ended by using Zippos to set fire to the thatched straw roofs of huts in villages that were deemed unfriendly. Later in the war, Zippos became associated with marijuana and hashish use among disheartened troops. Civilians have since been the main collectors of Zippo lighters.

The entire "peace sign" phenomena are also well documented on the web. Whether it was a round symbol with an

upside down, three pronged “Y” inscribed inside, or a dove, or the image of a hand with the first two fingers extended into the air, the sign has been around for a long time. There are several sites that describe the history of the peace symbol, and several commercial sites catering to the “modern peace crowd.”

8) Read Other Works by Tim O’Brien

I’ve already called out the need to bring the “real” Tim O’Brien into the discussion, but using his other works of fiction as a springboard into the novel can offer a litmus test to his craft: a source where we can talk about intertextuality. When I first taught *In the Lake of the Woods*, it was the only piece by O’Brien on the syllabus. So, I gave them a chapter of O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*: “How to Tell a True War Story.” This chapter/short story gave us a way to test the truth as it pertains to the soldier who has seen action, and it also gave us another piece of O’Brien to bring to the table. The second year I taught CIS: Lit, I required both novels. We read *The Things They Carried* before reading *In the Lake of the Woods* and their background knowledge of the war increased, their understanding of Wade was much more comprehensive, and our discussions and questions were far better.

I suggest to students that they read O’Brien’s other war novels, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Going After Cacciato*, but few have that much extra time during the semester. One more short piece about craft, which I suggest you read, if not your students, is “The Things That Writers Carry” (see below for citation). It’s interesting to hear the intentionality of O’Brien in bringing a sense of truth to the reader, as well as to himself, through these novels.

9) Hold a Trial

To culminate our discussions and analysis, I ask students to hold the criminal trial of John Wade. This trial itself takes about two hours during a single class period, or over the course of two, but the activity takes about one week to prepare. First, at least 3-4 days ahead of the trial, help students formulate the exact

crime(s) of which Wade is guilty and make sure the entire class understands the charge(s). Next, ask students to gather textual evidence as homework or during class discussions. Separate students into a prosecuting team and a defense team about 2-3 days before the trial is held in class. Note cards are preferable, but they can use their texts during the trial. The goal is to have students using the text to present certainties to the court; however, there aren't that many certainties in the text, so it becomes very challenging to prove anything during the court sessions.

The day before the trial, I ask each team to identify 2-3 students to be the leads for each team. This small group meets to discuss the charges and how the defense will plead. The remaining team members act as witnesses (and better know their parts well if they don't want to be embarrassed by their well-read peers) to be called to the stand for examination and cross examination. I am usually the judge but a student, having the ability to maintain order and rules, would be preferable. I then tell them that the prosecution will begin with opening arguments and the defense can respond (3 minute limit each). Then, the trial can begin, the prosecution calling witnesses and the defense crossing them. Most students have seen court proceedings, on television or in films, and know how it goes. While there are no time limits, the judge may need to keep the questioning focused and on target. Having extra students, who don't have a specific role to play, serve as the jury is an option if there are enough students in class. When that is the case, I ask the jury to deliberate in a "Socratic circle" (for information on Socratic circles, see <http://www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0394ch01.pdf>).

At the end of the trial I ask students to write a secret ballot to see if anyone is convinced, without a reasonable doubt, of Wade's guilt. I also assign a journal which is three-pronged: they analyze how their reading process has changed; they define their role as a reader; and they discuss what their final truth is, and whether or not that truth is discoverable, within this novel.