

3. Narrative Techniques and Basic Elements in the Novel: Structure, Plot, Character, and Setting Development with Reference to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990)

Introduction

The novel is one of the most adaptable and influential forms of literature, capable of representing complex experiences through narrative. It typically combines several fundamental elements—structure, plot, character, and setting—to create a unified artistic work. Over time, novelists have experimented with these elements to reflect not only events but also deeper human emotions, social issues, and philosophical questions. Narrative techniques, such as perspective, symbolism, or metafiction, often enhance these elements, shaping the way stories are told and received. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) provides a compelling case study for understanding how these features function, as the text redefines traditional expectations of war narratives through its innovative form and style.

3.1. Narrative Techniques in the Novel

Narrative techniques are the strategies an author uses to communicate meaning beyond the surface of the story. In novels, these can include first-person or third-person narration, the use of symbolism, repetition, or experimental structures such as stream of consciousness and metafiction. These techniques influence how readers perceive truth, character development, and the broader purpose of the narrative.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien employs metafiction as a central technique, repeatedly drawing attention to the process of storytelling itself. For example, in "How to Tell a True War Story," the narrator directly challenges the idea of factual accuracy, suggesting that the real truth of war lies in its emotional impact rather than in literal details. Repetition is another technique O'Brien uses, as stories such as Kiowa's death are retold from multiple perspectives, showing how memory and trauma resist closure. These strategies expand the possibilities of the novel, turning it into a meditation on both war and the act of narration.

3.2. Structure and Plot

Traditionally, the structure of a novel is linear, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Plot refers to the arrangement of events that guide the reader through the story. However, modern and postmodern novels often experiment with non-linear structures to reflect fragmented memory, shifting perspectives, or unresolved conflicts.

O'Brien resists a conventional plot structure in *The Things They Carried*. Instead of presenting a chronological account of the Vietnam War, he organizes the text as a series of interlinked short stories. Together, they form a mosaic that reflects the disjointed and recurring nature of memory. There is no single climax or resolution; rather, the narrative circles back to events such as death and loss, highlighting their persistence in the minds of veterans. This fragmented structure mirrors the psychological realities of trauma and distinguishes the text from traditional war novels that follow a more straightforward storyline.

3.3. Character Development

Characters are central to the novel, providing readers with entry points into the emotional and psychological world of the narrative. Through dialogue, description, and inner reflection, authors create complex individuals who embody both personal and universal themes. Characterization can reveal the conflicts between personal identity, social expectations, and historical circumstances.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien develops characters by focusing on their inner burdens as much as their outward actions. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, for instance, struggles with guilt and distraction, torn between his role as a leader and his longing for home. Other soldiers are distinguished by what they carry—both physical items and emotional weights—which become symbols of their personalities and struggles. O'Brien presents his characters as individuals while also portraying them as representatives of a generation shaped by the Vietnam War. This duality gives the text both personal intimacy and collective significance.

3.4. Setting Development

Setting provides the backdrop against which characters and events unfold. In novels, setting is not only physical but can also be cultural, historical, or psychological. Effective use of setting grounds the story in a recognizable world while also enhancing mood, theme, and symbolism.

In *The Things They Carried*, the physical setting of the Vietnam jungle plays a crucial role. It is depicted as both vividly real and symbolically oppressive, shaping the soldiers' daily lives and reinforcing their vulnerability. At the same time, O'Brien contrasts the warfront with settings outside of Vietnam, such as the American Midwest, to highlight the dislocation felt by veterans returning home. The shifting settings reinforce the tension between war experiences and ordinary life, illustrating how the effects of conflict extend beyond the battlefield.

Conclusion

The novel as a literary form is defined by its use of structure, plot, character, and setting, all of which are shaped by distinctive narrative techniques. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* exemplifies how these elements can be reimagined to capture the complexities of war and memory. Through its fragmented structure, metafictional commentary, psychologically rich characters, and evocative settings, the work demonstrates how the novel can transcend simple storytelling to become a meditation on truth, trauma, and the power of narrative itself.

References

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