



4-2016

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bonney, Sarah (2016) "Morality and Pleasure in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol9/iss1/4>

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# Morality and Pleasure in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

*Sarah Bonney*

In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien tells of a group of soldiers' experiences during and after the Vietnam War. Throughout the novel, the soldiers are forced to construct a new morality as a result of the violence required of them; however, the soldiers' wartime moral system conflicts with the civilian moral system, which they knew before the war and which is still in place on the home front. The civilian moral system is black-and-white with strong, simple standards to dictate acceptable behavior. Aggressive behavior, such as assault and murder, is consistently condemned and punished with fines, incarceration, and occasionally the death penalty. However, because a soldier's duty is comprised of immoral acts, this civilian moral code is no longer applicable. Instead, killing other human beings becomes morally upright, as long as those human beings are the enemy. In opposition to counterculture claims, the soldiers do not live without a code of ethics, as Jimmy Cross demonstrates by his guilt about Lavender's death and his commitment to be a better military leader who "[performs] his duties firmly and without negligence" (24). However, their understanding of what is ethical and what is not shifts because their duty is inherently unethical. Consequently, the soldiers must contrive a new moral system that includes violence as an honorable way to fulfill their duty, allowing the soldiers to feel pleasure in combination with

acts of violence. Unlike pleasure in civilian life, pleasure in war is no longer a reward for good behavior or a byproduct of moral living. Instead, pleasure is an emotional response to perceived benefits, such as increased safety and control. Due to the soldiers' construction of a new moral system and the resulting correlation of pleasure with violence, morality is redefined as the least harmful way to resolve conflict, and in the battlefield, violence is that method of conflict resolution.

As the soldiers sludge through the Vietnam jungle in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the comforts of home are restricted to a few handpicked personal items each soldier carries in his rucksack (3). These mementos provide limited peace and little pleasure. Far from their civilian life and knee deep in the muddy horrors of war, soldiers find pleasure in that which might have repulsed their pre-war selves. Azar enjoys killing Lavender's puppy (35). After Lavender's death, Kiowa feels "pleased to be alive," denoting pleasure in his comrade's death (17). As the soldiers adapt to perform their service despite the repulsive nature of war, they adjust to feel pleasure differently. Noticeably, they feel pleasure honorably fulfilling their duty, which is to kill "gooks" (174). Socially conditioned to feel pleasure when fulfilling their duty, the soldiers develop to find pleasure in violence because it is their duty. Furthermore, the rise of American counterculture in the 1960s and 70s catalyzed a moral reevaluation. In the years following World War II, the popularity of war stories in both film and print skyrocketed. These representations idealized war and reflected wide acceptance of violence in a wartime context. American soldiers began deploying for Vietnam in the latter years of this cultural wave, but rising counterculture openly criticized all violence, regardless of context. Consequently, cultural activists opposed the war and condemned the soldiers' acts as immoral, invalidating the pleasure correlated with duty. For the soldiers, morality is already a fluid concept; whereas they understood killing as wrong, they are now encouraged to kill their enemies because what was once wrong is now encouraged by a new moral code which condones violence. However, because the Vietnam War coincides with American counterculture, even a restructured military code of ethics is chastisable. What is "good" or "right" is now uncertain, but this is further complicated when the soldiers develop to find pleasure in violence.

In order to reevaluate the ethicality of wartime violence, wartime morality must be reconciled to create a standard for honorable military service; violence must be condoned for soldiers to feel pleasure fulfilling their duty. However, this reconciliation is complicated by the soldiers' pleasure in violence and

death. This conflict of home front morality and wartime morality as manifested through pleasure has yet to be addressed in war literature or ethics criticism in the discussion of *The Things They Carried*. Addressing the most prominent conflict between civilian and military ethics, Cheyney Ryan explains, "Soldiers do no wrong even if their cause is unjust," explicating the ethical pardon freely granted to military men (11). As demonstrated through the soldiers' experiences with pleasure, the soldiers' moral code must change from that of their civilian lives in order for them to find moral justification in the everyday violence war requires. Although "the resort to war" and "the conduct of war" have been examined with an ethical lens, the adoption of a new moral code in the battlefield, especially as manifested through pleasure, has not (McMahan 693). In O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the concept of morality is complicated by the treatment of violence and a connection between violence and pleasure; resultantly, morality must be defined on a spectrum rather than a binary scale.

Although the battlefield requires an adjusted moral system, counterculture's condemnation of all violence prevents reconciliation between the military and civilian understandings of morality. On the home front, many began to question whether military service was a moral duty, leading to inquiry as to whether killing as encompassed in military service is ethical. As a result, whether military men should receive the "ethical pardon" addressed by Ryan is also put in a doubtful light (11). If military service is not ethical, violence and killing performed to fulfill the soldiers' duty is immoral and condemnable. This cultural philosophy would condemn Cross's renewed commitment to his soldiers and his role as a military leader because this becomes synonymous with a renewed commitment to kill the enemy (23). In order to reconcile their military duty and the anti-military sentiments growing back home, the soldiers of the Vietnam War are pushed to construct a new moral code independent of military ethics established in previous wars. In previous conflicts, wartime violence was condoned by the civilian public, and soldiers were able to depend wholly on the "ethical pardon" granted in times of conflict (Ryan 11). However, the public's condemnation of all violence during the Vietnam War requires soldiers to establish a system to justify the violence war requires. Because military morality is no longer justified by its context within the civilian moral code due to counterculture during the Vietnam War, a wartime moral code must be established. American culture's rejection of the military moral system requires the soldiers to set new standards for acceptable and unacceptable behavior

In contrast to the belief that moral acts hold positive consequences and immoral acts hold negative consequences, violence, immoral behavior according to the civilian moral system, holds great benefits for the soldiers. As a result, violence becomes a pleasure trigger for the soldiers. Should a soldier kill an enemy combatant, the soldier's safety increases, and he feels greater control over his environment. Additionally, subduing the enemy, which requires violence, is the core of successful military service. However, to fulfill their duty, soldiers are required to kill "regardless of [their] inclinations," countering the moral foundation of their youth (Schumaker 84). Conditioned to feel pleasure through fulfilling one's duty honorably, the soldiers adapt to find pleasure in violence. In response to the connection between duty and pleasure, the soldiers in *The Things They Carried* begin to find pleasure in violence, pain, and death, which they did not feel before their enlistment. Mitchel Sanders "almost affectionately" cuts off the thumb of an enemy's corpse and "smiling" further abuses the body (13). Voluntarily returning to the war, an unnamed soldier explains, "All that peace, man, it felt so good it hurt. I want to hurt it back" (34). Because killing fulfills their duty and increases safety and control, it brings the soldiers pleasure in the forms of relief, comfort, amusement, and other positive emotions.

As violence is a necessary element of war, a new definition of war morality requires a new definition of violence. The soldiers' correlation of pleasure and violence presents violence as an effective and ethical method of resolving conflict rather than a definite immorality. Besides serving as punishment "for the sins of the aggressor" and "defense of innocent others", killing the enemy eliminates the evil contained in the opposition, which is the higher moral purpose of war (Ryan 15). "[Wasting] gooks" serves as its own protection because not only does it prevent future danger for the soldiers, but it makes the war end faster (174). Violence against the enemy resolves the conflict behind the war. Additionally, among the soldiers, violence becomes an act to restore balance, as Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen demonstrate during their disagreement resolved with violence and resulting in friendship (59; 62). Because the combat zone is so distanced from the structured justice system of civilian society, the soldiers favor the method of conflict resolution that is accessible to them: violence. They adopt violence as an acceptable form of conflict resolution among themselves as well, as the soldiers are trained to accept and carry out violence against the enemy when addressing a moral dispute. As the duty of a soldier forces regular men to forgo their civilian morality and accept violence as honorable

behavior, it is recognized and sanctioned as an ethical way to address and settle conflict between individual men as well as between themselves and the enemy. Violence and killing becomes the justice system of choice, as other methods of justice have little potency in the war zone. On the black-and-white morality spectrum, violence moves from clearly unethical to morally ambiguous as it is defined as an unavoidably harmful, but potent method of conflict resolution.

The soldiers are forced to construct a new ethical system accommodating of the violence now required of them. Subsequently, the definition of moral behavior changes from a system of set behavioral expectations, which consistently condemn violence, to the least harmful way of resolving a conflict, allowing violence in specific contexts. By this definition, a war can be moral if it is the best and least destructive way to resolve a conflict or eradicate a greater immorality. Furthermore, a war can be immoral if there was a less destructive way to resolve the conflict addressed by the war. O'Brien and the other soldiers struggle to accept that war can be moral because the violent acts required of its participants are massive immoralities according to civilian moral standards. O'Brien writes, "A true war story is never moral," pushing the question of whether any immorality can be eclipsed by good intentions (65). However, the soldiers still strive to rectify perceived wrongs, indicating that they believe there can be morality and goodness despite immorality. Their actions support the assertion that war does have a moral code, even though it must be reconstructed. Edward E. Waldron claims that a moral system "might have its own codes of acceptable behavior, often at odds with the larger value system," indicating that a morality established for a specific environment can stand in opposition to the morality of another environment (170). Because civilian immorality is the only path to fulfilling their duty, the standard for moral behavior as set by their modified moral system is not defined as clearly as it is by civilian morality. In war, violence is a means to an end: the end of the war and the end of a greater immorality than that committed by the soldiers. Although it contradicts civilian immorality, wartime morality does involve stipulations of right and wrong.

As war requires a new system of morality in order to justify violence as a vehicle to peace, a new standard for immorality must be established. Even though some acts of violence are acceptable according to wartime morality, not all violence is acceptable. Morality cannot exist without immorality; therefore, a code must distinguish moral violence from immoral violence. Civilian morality can easily label all acts of violence as immoral, but war zone morality does not allow for easy judgment. Although all violence is destructive and harmful,

in war, the benefits and long term rewards of some violence outweigh the short term damage. Consequently, in place of a right and a wrong, there are two wrongs and the soldiers must choose the less offensive option. Tim O'Brien must choose between killing other men and refusing his duty (40). Mitchell Sanders must choose between offending a comrade and accepting a dead man's thumb (13). "There is no 'right' answer" because neither choice is ethical (Wharton). However, despite the lack of clarity between right and wrong, a distinct wrong must be established in order for a definite right to exist. By the new definition of morality, immorality must be unreasonably destructive and without a purpose. Such is Rat Kiley's unprovoked killing of the baby water buffalo. "Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original," remarks Mitchell Sanders, condemning Kiley's act (76). Just as new standards for acceptable behavior are being established, so are standards for unacceptable behavior. Because the soldiers' modified morality establishes a new right, it also establishes a new wrong.

Because violence is unavoidable in the warzone, a violent act's moral justification is measured by the act's positive repercussions. Mirroring the spectrum-nature of combat morality, there is a spectrum of violence in order to establish "wrong" in wartime, but in place of "right" and "wrong," as bookends the morality scale, the violence spectrum is marked with "beneficial" and "destructive". However, application of this new system is uncertain because it results in a faint line between acceptable and unacceptable violence. When Azar ties another soldier's adopted puppy to an antipersonnel mine and blows it up, he responds to the other soldiers' disapproval, exclaiming, "What's everybody so upset about?" implying that he doesn't understand why his action is wrong, as their role as soldiers constantly mandates similar violence (35). Because the soldiers spend their time and supplies killing the enemy, the death of a dog seems inconsequential. The situation is similar to Kiley and the baby water buffalo, but Azar expresses confusion over the ethicality of his behavior, because although killing the puppy brings him pleasure, the other soldiers judge this violent act as unethical. The soldiers question the acceptability of Azar's act because their ethical pardon as defined by Cheney Ryan only extends to inflicting violence on the enemy. The puppy is not the enemy and therefore the soldiers do not benefit from its death; consequently, Azar's act is unethical. However, since he is younger than most of the other men, the soldiers assume that Azar has not yet made the distinction between violence against the enemy and violence in general, so the soldiers do not condemn Azar like

they do Kiley. The soldiers' most significant conflict is distinguishing between moral violence and immoral violence, when both are immoral within civilian society. Ultimately, the deciding factor is feeling and personal understanding. Bertrand Russell articulated this difficulty: "The fundamental facts in this as in all ethical questions are feelings" (127). Azar was not outwardly condemned by the soldiers because he didn't understand the difference between moral and immoral violence. Although soldiers can construct a modified morality, the ability to discern between the moral and immoral varies by the individual's understanding of the spectrum of violence in conjunction with the spectrum of wartime morality. Consequently, soldiers experience moral disorientation as they seek to serve honorably, but they cannot establish an overarching morality system for the entire group. Nevertheless, the implication of a sliding scale against which violence can be judged designates that war can be moral if its violent acts benefit the majority; accordingly, should the harm caused by war outweigh its positive consequences, it is an immoral war.

Pleasure is dependent on context because it is partially stimulated by predictability, "repetition and sameness"; for this reason, violence can stimulate pleasure if it is a consistent element within a specific environment (Dale 257). Subsequently, displeasure results when violence is removed. This complicates the soldiers' adjustment back to civilian life, as they are immediately unable to feel pleasure once they return home. Removal of a moral system in place of another will result in displeasure because of the lost "repetition and sameness" and resulting moral disorientation (Dale 257). The trauma of the harsh transition back to civilian life accentuates this moral turbulence the soldiers continue to experience causing further disorientation. Returning to a world they cannot understand and that cannot understand them creates a conflict the soldiers are unprepared to face. Soldiers are experienced in resolving issues through violence, but, in the civilian world, their method of conflict resolution is not condonable, further contributing to the loss of control they experience upon returning home. Because their worldview has been altered by the moral disassociation and horrors of war, they struggle readapting to a civilian worldview based in a black-and-white morality. The veterans can no longer accept this system as they understand that violence can have beneficial consequences. In a community that eschews the moral system that provides structure in the war zone, the veterans are unable to face the conflicts that accompany their transition from soldier to civilian. Although the soldiers are skilled in resolving conflicts through violence, this ability is useless upon their return. The veterans'



inability to alleviate the tension between them and their communities leads to emotional and psychological isolation. Motivated by a sense of powerlessness, many veterans attempted to restore balance through violence, as Norman Bowker does, “[hanging] himself in the locker room of a YMCA” after years of attempting to assimilate into society (149). Unable to reconcile their war experiences with a civilian worldview, many veterans revert to the violence they learned to trust in the jungles of Vietnam.

The correlation of violence and pleasure complicates the assumption that pleasure accompanies positive behavior for those striving to live morally, and so the soldiers’ return home turns emotionally traumatic because they are immediately unable to feel pleasure due to their sudden and antithetic change of environment. As demonstrated by the soldiers’ experiences after the war, pleasure can be limited by context. The soldiers learned to correlate pleasure with violence in the battlefield, but because violence is immoral in a civilian context, the veterans are unable to perform the violent acts that previously held positive emotion for them. Once the soldiers return home, pleasure derived from violence is no longer available to the upstanding civilian because upstanding civilians do not commit violence. Even though “participation in a war may be good, honorable, even heroic,” the juxtaposition of conditioned civilian morality and acquired wartime morality produces moral whiplash suffered by veterans as they attempt to process why their previous duty is now wholly unethical (Ryan 11). Instead of correlating pleasure with good behavior and happy experiences, the veterans correlate pleasure with Vietnam because of the violence available there. However, because of the violence there, the veterans also correlate Vietnam with immorality. When O’Brien returns to Vietnam with his daughter, he looks “for signs of forgiveness or personal grace” (173). He understands that the violence he and the other soldiers committed is inherently immoral. He no longer seeks pleasure through reminiscing violent memories because he has returned to civilian life, and he is prevented from experiencing pleasure in that capacity because violence is no longer acceptable. Ultimately, pleasure can be restricted to specific acts in specific contexts; although pleasure can be defined by its stimulants and the result of action, it is defined by its context as well.

Because of war’s violence and counterculture’s antagonism, morality gains new meaning in the context of *The Things They Carried*, resulting in shifting definitions of pleasure, morality, violence, and war, dependent on a spectrum determined by context. However, the wartime spectrum of morality cannot be easily reconciled with the civilian binary moral system. The soldiers experience

a harsh transition, void of pleasure, as they return to a familiar community that soon becomes foreign through moral disorientation and emotional alienation. Because the soldiers restructured their understanding of right and wrong in order to willingly carry out the immorality required of their duty, they recognize violence as an efficient means of conflict resolution. As a result, upon returning home, the soldiers are stripped of the pleasure of duty and the pleasure of violence by their new situation. Having endured attack in Vietnam and forced to face opposition in the country they fought for, many Vietnam veterans, like Norman Bowker, seek solace in the method of conflict resolution they learned to trust in the battlefield: violence.

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