The Things They Carried: An Analysis of Loyalty and its Disintegration in the Combat Zone

In Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, a unique brotherhood develops among the soldiers. The responsibilities and terrors faced in the war bring the men together in a binding pact of loyalty. By joining the battalion, an individual enlists as part of the “membership in the family, the blood fraternity.” This comradery runs deep enough that the soldiers feel as though they are true “brothers” (185). When the soldiers leave the boonies and their familial pact and “become a civilian,” they experience a “new sense of separation” from their brothers that equates to feelings of betrayal (185, 184). The creation of a “blood fraternity,” and then the collapse of such when soldiers leave the combat zone, calls for a deeper analysis of what this implies about the meaning of loyalty itself and how it changes when soldiers find themselves on the sidelines. O’Brien’s novel begs the reader to explore how the disintegration of unity and stability within the community alters the meaning of loyalty within the time of war.

Literary critics have most generally addressed loyalty as a bond among a group of people either through shared experiences or a unified purpose. Loyalty, or “community” as most commonly labeled within the literary world, is defined by Owen Gilman as a group of individuals united under a “common purpose” (126). Community is similarly introduced by Alex Vernon as a “universalizing spirit engendered by sharing the combat experience” (“Salvation” 180). From these definitions, we can draw the overarching understanding that loyalty is a characteristic of individuals who both share their destination and the experiences along the journey. While these readings are correct, they fail to articulate the ways loyalty specifically develops throughout shared experiences and why those changes are significant, especially when
pertaining to combat in war. Loyalty is also characterized as a duel characteristic when Farrell O’Gorman presents that a soldier’s loyalty to the war and their home “are part of the same whole,” and thus, loyalty to two opposing sources can coincide at the same time (298). While this claim is significant in pointing out that loyalty can support opposing sources, no analysis has been taken as to what occurs when loyalty is lost altogether and how that absence redefines betrayal and other related concepts. Due to the literary world’s neglect in addressing these various avenues of loyalty, it is important to explore the meaning of loyalty in war and what happens when it is destroyed.

While loyalty is commonly understood as a characteristic that binds two people together with mutual trust, I argue that in a war setting O’Brien redefines loyalty as the creation of a war family in a home away from home. Not only does the war unite the soldiers in O’Brien’s novel, it binds them as a familial unit through the blood and gore they experience. Nonetheless, when a soldier is taken away from his unit to rejoin the civilian life, he feels betrayed as his squad embraces the new substitute who replaces him. Because the familial community shifts to become a thing of the past, O’Brien redefines betrayal as a fault perceived within the individual who incorrectly accuses the replacement soldier for deliberately replacing them in the community when in fact no malice was intended. The development of betrayal gives birth to the negative emotions that signal revenge and eventually cruelty. As the soldiers desperately seek to latch onto any form of relief from the anxieties and horrors they feel, they become vulnerable to the influences of other agents that act over them. Based on the text, I claim that cruelty is defined as the change of the very nature of an individual to selfishness and brutality. It is a permanent, internal state of being that encompasses evil. While cruelty is generally defined as a malicious action that is performed, O’Brien ultimately depicts cruelty as an independent agent that can act
for itself. In this way, Cruelty is a being that is capable of overtaking and controlling any individual that falls under his command.

For O’Brien, loyalty is not solely trust that binds two individuals together, it is the creation of home away from home. As soldiers spend time on the battlefield together they become “close friends” and join the “tribe” of their battalion (O’Brien 183). This “tribe” shares a strong bond of unity with a joint ambition to protect and support one another. This state of loyalty is characterized by Alex Vernon as a “communitas” identity (“Salvation” 180). A soldier’s communitas tribe goes beyond the common belief that loyalty is merely mutual trust within a community for it is professed in the text as the formation of a familial unit in foreign lands. O’Brien describes the soldier’s community as a “blood fraternity,” emphasizing the unique togetherness they experience. Not only are they friends and fellow soldiers, but they share blood just like biological “brothers” (O’Brien 185). This enlightens our understanding to view loyalty as the very creation of family itself. While the soldiers do not literally share blood and DNA, the blood they do share makes them family. Whether it be their own blood when they are wounded, or that of the enemy in combat, the blood fraternity demonstrates how loyalty is created in battle. Because the soldiers both “give it together, [and] take it together,” we are able to see how the creation of a real family does not require similar blood nor genes, but rather similar experiences (183). The act of killing and dying together makes the brotherhood real and exhibits loyalty as the creation of home away from home. Loyalty is the development of familial relationships beyond genetics that are as legitimate as any biological relationship.

Because loyalty is the creation of a family away at war, it also comes to be understood as stationary trust that can only occur while remaining in the war zone. When Tim O’Brien the narrator is transferred to a supply section, he begins to experience a new “sense of separation” from his tribal brothers (O’Brien 184). He realizes that once you leave the blood fraternity, “no
matter how hard you try, you can’t pretend to be a part of it” anymore because you don’t have the same connection (185). While loyalty can be tightknit when the members are together, once they part ways, loyalty dissolves. This sense of separation demonstrates loyalty as trust that is dependent upon physical presence with the family. Even if someone attempts to pretend to be part of the communitas identity after they have left, they are unsuccessful because the situation is out of their hands. This understanding establishes that loyalty does not stretch across time, nor distance, nor circumstances. Loyalty is stationary trust that only occurs in the present. O’Brien the narrator describes this “shift” that occurs as “pure and total loss,” leaving him not as a soldier but as a civilian. In the end, he becomes a “stranger” to those friends he had once loved (188). This despairing transformation captures the depth of the alienation and separation experienced by those who leave their tribe. O’Brien is not a long-lost friend to those in Alpha Company, but a completely unknown and unfamiliar stranger. In this light, loyalty is interpreted as fragile trust that is susceptible to being forgotten. It is delicate and inflexible to the changes of time and physical location.

As loyalty disintegrates, our understanding of betrayal shifts as O’Brien redefines it as a soldier’s blindness to the reality of a situation, resulting in their unjust accusation against another man for causing his plight. Thus, betrayal is a fault of the individual feeling betrayed. This is something that Tim O’Brien experiences as Mitchell Sanders tells him, “you’re out of touch. Jorgenson – he’s with us now.” Not only has O’Brien physically left the tribe, but he has been replaced by another soldier. When he finds himself “out of touch” with the brotherhood, O’Brien’s automatic response of “[feeling] betrayed” and getting angry at Jorgenson exemplifies betrayal to be the inability to rationally survey a situation and draw an accurate conclusion about what has occurred (O’Brien 188). Rather than sensibly considering that when he left the battalion after getting shot there would be a substitute sent in after him, O’Brien jumps to the false
conclusion that he was deliberately replaced and blames Jorgenson for his discharge. O’Brien’s outburst of jealousy further asserts betrayal as falsely accusing another man for an individual’s own isolation. This analysis shows that betrayal originates within the individual who feels betrayed because betrayal is the failure to see the situation at face value. We are able to better understand this form of betrayal through Michael Allen’s description of how community becomes both “more inclusive and more exclusive” in war (98). A community is inclusive when a soldier is adapted into his new squad where he fits in with “chumminess and group rapport” (O’Brien 193). This incidentally excludes the previous soldier who had resided in the company and makes him a “has-been” (202). The exile of a “has-been” from the squad does not demonstrate malicious deportation, however, if the “has-been” takes the change bitterly he is claiming betrayal upon himself. Thus, betrayal is a soldier’s inability to recognize the true cause to a situation, leading them to wrongfully accuse another for their relocation.

Resulting from the anxieties that arise when a man is replaced in his community, it becomes significant to analyze insecurity as O’Brien rewrites it as internal panic demonstrated through illogical behavior. When Dave Jensen breaks Lee Strunk’s nose for stealing his jackknife, Jensen breaks the bond of trust previously shared and opens the way for insecurity to be born in an environment that Vernon calls the “alternative chaos” (Soldiers 184). Even though Jensen’s fear of Strunk’s revenge is “mostly in his head,” it leads to extreme paranoia as he takes “special precautions” to protect himself and watches Strunk with “quick, nervous eyes” (O’Brien 60). Jensen’s jittery eyes darting from side to side demonstrate his experience of feeling insecure through internal paranoia that causes him to feel overwhelming panic every thought of every waking and sleeping moment. Due to the “silent tension” that increases exponentially with time, insecurity will publicly present itself when a soldier snaps with an outburst of illogical behavior just as Jensen does one afternoon when he begins “firing and yelling” until he has “ rattled off an
entire magazine of ammunition.” He even goes so far as to borrow a pistol and “break his own nose” in an attempt to plead peace with his hallucination of a revenge-driven Lee Strunk (60). These irrational actions demonstrate that insecurity is not only an internal sensation, but also an external demonstration of the internal paranoia. By analyzing Jensen’s irrational decision to break his own nose to make amends with Strunk, the definition of insecurity is enhanced to include the inability to foresee the consequences for one’s actions.

The manifestation of illogical behaviors enlightens our understanding of revenge which is classified by O’Brien as involuntarily releasing a person’s unbearable negative emotions in order to find closure, or in other words, getting “cinched.” When Tim O’Brien the narrator is betrayed by the men of his company and replaced by Bobby Jorgenson, he is filled with envy. O’Brien says that seeing Jorgenson fitting in well with the company is “what cinched it” and transformed his envy into anger and revenge (O’Brien 194). This reference of getting “cinched” turns us to the image of a spring that is wound up tighter and tighter, promising with every twist an ever-stronger rebuttal that shoots forth when freed from its uncomfortable position. This analogy of insecurity within the soldiers cinched to the max shows that revenge is a source of relief from unbearable chaos within. While revenge is usually associated with intentional harm directed at others, the text shows that revenge is purely a means of escape. While choosing to intentionally harm someone is a conscious decision, or as Vernon describes it, a “volitional act,” the initiation of getting cinched is involuntary (Soldiers 184). By examining O’Brien’s feelings previous to the decision to enact vengeance on Jorgenson we are able to see that O’Brien “didn’t hate him anymore” and that he had “lost some of the outrage and passion” (O’Brien 191). This decline in resentment exhibits that the act of revenge has nothing to do with Jorgenson, but rather the built-up anxiety and pain that has pestered O’Brien for so long. The moment of revenge presents itself when O’Brien realizes he has been replaced in his squad and this finally gets him “cinched.”
Involuntarily, O’Brien reacts to the personal emotional baggage he carries and moves forward with his plan to harm Jorgenson. Acknowledging the fact that O’Brien was beginning to move on from the past, but that his jealousy was involuntarily renewed upon seeing the soldiers happily together, revenge is characterized as involuntarily initiated. Getting cinched is a spontaneous occurrence that is independent of the will of the individual.

A soldier becomes vulnerable to the influence of outside sources following a revengeful outburst, which introduces cruelty as it comes to be defined as the change of the very nature of an individual to cold-hearted selfishness. While cruelty is usually seen as a hostile action that is initiated and completed, cruelty is now portrayed as a permanent internal state of being. It is the cancellation of charitable characteristics and the conquest of malicious ones. This understanding of cruelty is supported by Bernard Miller’s commentary as he speaks from the soldier’s perspective, stating that “we are not simply witness to the violence but are transformed by it” (321). This transformation is not an episodic nor fleeting phenomenon, but is a lasting change that defines the nature of the individual as a selfishly motivated being. When Tim O’Brien the narrator realizes that this change has occurred he states: “something had gone wrong. I’d come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person . . . [but now] I’d turned mean inside” (190). This completely opposite flip from thoughtfulness to unkindness is a demonstration that cruelty is the change that brings out malice to be the permanent, dominant characteristic of an individual. But even more, the surprise in O’Brien’s above realization underlies that cruelty is an unforeseen and gradual change. It does not announce itself before beginning the transformation. In fact, the process begins much further back in basic training, explains Gwynne Dyer, where the end goal of the program is about “changing [the soldiers] so that they can do things they wouldn’t have dreamt of otherwise” (177). In order to train the men to surpass physical and mental barriers and become war soldiers, Kevin and Laurie Hillstrom describe that the soldier’s individual identities
begin to “wither under the hot glare” of the pressures placed on them (124). This opens the door for cruelty to slip in and convert soldiers to selfishness. This conversion illustrates how cruelty is an innate change that turns the individual inward with a hunger to meet their own selfish desires, no matter the consequences and risks. It is such an overwhelming arousal that the former identity of the soldier is lost to brutality forever.

Once the soldier is overtaken by brutality, O’Brien ultimately exposes cruelty’s true identity as an independent agent functional on its own. Cruelty is now personified as an autonomous being with its own name and gender. Contrary to the common belief that Cruelty is performed by the subject, Cruelty is capable of operating on his own and acting upon the subject. Cruelty is viewed this way because of how he interacts with the soldiers who are, as phrased by Miller, “experienced by the violence” (321). The violence that is acting upon the soldiers is the same as Cruelty acting upon the soldiers. Because Cruelty is the culprit and the soldier is the victim, we see that Cruelty is an independent agent that is capable of working on his own to overpower his prey. After accepting the change to selfishness that has occurred within himself, O’Brien describes the coldness inside him as “something dark and beyond reason.” It is so powerful and controlling that O’Brien “wanted to hurt Bobby Jorgenson the way he’d hurt” him (191). The analysis of these dark desires that are “beyond reason” exhibits that Cruelty is a completely separate identity from Tim O’Brien and any of the other soldiers. He is a dark existence that survives and thinks all on his own. As Cruelty works toward controlling his targets, he urges O’Brien forward to enact vengeance upon Jorgenson. The way Cruelty compels O’Brien to harm another man reveals that Cruelty’s objective is to overshadow and victimize as many individuals within his reach as possible. If he can anger Jorgenson enough to clutch him within his grasp, Cruelty will have one more minion at his command. This goes to show that Cruelty is not only a powerful identity, but also an identity with the goal to command as many
soldiers at his wing as he can. Therefore, if Cruelty is successful in governing millions, the battle is no longer between the Americans and the Vietnamese—the real enemy of the war is Cruelty itself.
Works Cited


