

The Mirrored Self: Fragmented Narrative in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

Man – let me offer you a definition – is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker buoys and trail signs of stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall – or when he's about to drown – he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

– Graham Swift, *Waterland*

Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* tells the story of John Wade, a Vietnam veteran whose scandal-ridden failed campaign for the U.S. Senate sends him, and his wife Kathy, retreating to a lakeside cabin hidden in the woods of northern Minnesota. When Kathy mysteriously disappears, John's fragile hold on reality is exemplified through flashbacks and internal narrative, along with testimony from involved characters. John has no memory of the night his wife went missing and retreats into memories of his childhood, college years, and Vietnam experiences to cope. John is the only one who knows the truth, but he has no idea what he knows. The reader is left to decide if Kathy got lost in the wilderness, if she left him to wallow in his own self-pity, or if John murdered her. The story concludes without giving the reader a definitive answer. All we know is the story John tells.

Humans are creatures of story. As natural storytellers we create narratives out of our lives, so that even the most mundane experience becomes part of a story we tell ourselves about who and why we are, how we came to be, or who we want to be. These narratives act as powerful tools in developing, or at least imagining, our identity. Generally, these narratives sync with who the world perceives the individual to be, and merely work as a method by which they process and order their lived experiences. When someone endures a traumatic event, however, the self-narrative process can be interrupted, and fracturing occurs. This fracturing of identity

happens when the traumatic experience cannot be assimilated into the individual's personal narrative and the collective story of self is no longer whole. The trauma intrudes over and over, creating cracks in a once cohesive identity. As the individual's personal narrative fragments beyond their ability to make sense of the pieces the result is complete and utter disintegration of the narrative, and eventually of the individual as well. Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* demonstrates how narration made unstable by trauma can collapse leaving a traumatized individual with no way to discern between fiction and reality, or to define self.

John Wade's first narrative fracturing begins with exposure to trauma early in his childhood. Wade is verbally and emotionally abused by his father who calls him "Jiggling John" and "Blubby little pansy" (O'Brien 67), or "Javelin John" (O'Brien 208) when he isn't ignoring him altogether. The trauma of his father's abuse causes John Wade to retreat into magic performances that he practices in front of an "old stand-up mirror down in the basement" (O'Brien 65). As John Wade withdraws further and further into himself to avoid his father's maliciousness, the mirror takes on transformative properties and represents more than just a means of perfecting his craft. In the mirror "where John Wade mostly lived" (O'Brien 65), he creates a version of his life in which he is "no longer a lonely little kid" (O'Brien 65) whose father is a depressive alcoholic and cruel to him. Instead, Wade's new narrative is one in which he can "read his father's mind" (O'Brien 65) to pick up on all the felt, but unsaid, affection his father has for him, and to create moments of father-son bonding. Wade is aware of his reality but dissociates from the trauma it inflicts by rejecting it and creating a new one. Wade begins to carry the mirror with him "behind his eyes" (O'Brien 66) beyond his home; "secretly [keeping it] in his head" (O'Brien 65) to deal with unpleasant realities in every aspect of his life. By carrying

this metaphorical mirror beyond the walls of his childhood home, Wade is able to reflect a false image to the world that conceals his more vulnerable self.

According to Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trauma is “defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization” (465). John’s father’s abuse and neglect is so constant and pervasive that John cannot assimilate it into the narrative he has created for himself. He does not have what would contemporarily be considered healthy tools for coping with and responding to his trauma. Instead of confronting the reality that his father abuses him and his powerlessness to stop it, John creates an imagined reality where the world is exactly as he wants it to be. Within the world of the mirror John has absolute power and feels absolutely powerful.

The mirror becomes a haven that John Wade filters his whole self through, and behind which he hides from seemingly never-ending traumas of life. His “psychical organization” (Laplanche and Pontalis 465) is firmly based in the self he has constructed through the mirror. The mirror allows him to “slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy. The mirror made things better” (O’Brien 66). The mirror enhances his magician persona and allows him to build a narrative based on constant pretending with multiple iterations of identity: magician, spy, sorcerer, husband, politician. He no longer interacts with the world as it is presented to him, but through his manipulations of it via the mirror. More than roles assumed within appropriate circumstances, these identities become personas that Wade can pretend function separately from himself. When John Wade’s father dies, he performs “tricks in his mind” (O’Brien 31) to resurrect his father, not as he was, but as John wished him to be.

The trauma of his father's death is a further blow to John Wade's narrative and produces another fragment of himself: the spy. The loss of his father leaves Wade with abandonment issues that he has no means of resolving. When he meets and falls in love with Kathy, he is terrified that she will also abandon him, so he follows her everywhere. Spying on Kathy becomes an extension of his act as a magician because it is "like magic . . . a quick, powerful rush . . . [in which] [h]e [knows] things he shouldn't know" (O'Brien 32). This is another trick he performs, another image of himself the mirror reflects to make him feel powerful. Wade almost "loved her best when he was spying" (O'Brien 33) because trespassing into Kathy's private life "opened up a hidden world, new angles and new perspectives, new things to admire" (O'Brien 33). His power over her as the spy only makes John Wade love Kathy more, because it reflected the image of that power back to him. Unfortunately, his love for Kathy does not lessen the impact of trauma on his psyche, nor is it capable of consolidating his fracturing narrative.

John Wade's personal narrative is nearly shattered by his multiple and varied traumatic experiences as a soldier in Vietnam. While there, Wade is unable to indulge his need to spy on Kathy, and so he falls into yet another fragment of himself: Sorcerer. A moniker bestowed by the men of his military unit, and derived from his penchant for magic tricks, Wade likes the Sorcerer nickname because "it had magic, it suggested certain powers, certain rare skills and aptitudes" (O'Brien 37) and he felt that it cemented him into the brotherhood of his Company. The more time he spends immersed in war and separated from Kathy the more the lines between himself as John Wade and his persona as Sorcerer begin to blur. In fact, the lines become so distorted that Wade begins questioning his sanity for the first time, noting that "[t]he internal terrain [of his brain] had gone blurry; he couldn't get his bearings," and the distinction between delusion and reality becomes harder to find. (O'Brien 39). The trauma of seeing fellow soldiers dying bloody

and of having to kill others himself begins to wear on John Wade so much that he spends more and more time “gliding” (O’Brien 42) through time and space behind the mirrors.

The most horrific and traumatizing event of Vietnam for John Wade was his presence at and participation in the My Lai massacre. The trauma is so great that even his mirror trick is inconsistent in keeping him removed from reality. He knows something is wrong, so he tries to retreat “behind the mirrors in his head, pretending to be elsewhere, but even then, the landscapes kept coming at him fast and lurid” (O’Brien 105) making it impossible for him to entirely retreat mentally from the horrors around him. The Sorcerer falters and it is John Wade who fully witnesses the atrocities performed on innocent civilians by his fellow American soldiers. Wade is unwilling and unable to comprehend that the brutality he observes is real, and so he runs. He tries to escape the massacre, but there is nowhere to go, and it occurs to him that one day “the weight of this day would ultimately prove too much, that sooner or later he would have to lighten the load” (O’Brien 108). He knows that he is not capable of holding the truth of those memories in his mind without fracturing completely, so he works a little magic. He’s had plenty of practice at burying or obfuscating unpleasant memories and realities, so he tells himself “[t]his could not have happened. Therefore it did not” (O’Brien 109). The magnitude of trauma presented by what he witnessed and perpetrated at My Lai threatens to overwhelm him completely. In order to cope, to not have his mirrors shattered irrevocably, John Wade convinces himself that it did not happen the way he remembered. Maybe it didn’t even happen at all.

Vietnam imposed the greatest crack in John’s narrative identity, in his mirror, because everything about being there was so different from his former, “real” life. While Wade’s childhood abuse began his habit of disassociation to cope with trauma, his time in Vietnam cements that coping process. In his book *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, And Body in the*

*Healing of Trauma* Bessel Van Der Kolk states that “Disassociation prevents the trauma from becoming integrated within the conglomerated, ever-shifting stores of autobiographical memory, in essence creating a dual memory system” (O’Brien 182). He goes on to say that “Normal memory integrates the elements of each experience into the continuous flow of self-experience by a complex process of association” (O’Brien 182) where new experiences have meaning based on the context of past experiences, but with traumatic memory “the sensations, thoughts, and emotions of trauma [are] stored separately as frozen, barely comprehensible fragments” (O’Brien 182). Meaning that the traumatic memories exist outside the accepted narrative of self because they cannot be anchored to previous experiences. John is able to forget that he participated in My Lai because those memories are shoved out of the collective story. Unfortunately, such memories, though shunned, are preserved in ways that normal memories are not, and despite all efforts are never fully forgotten. John’s traumatic memories lurk on the edges of his self-narrative intruding into his collective memory at increasing intervals, disrupting any sense of unified self. The cracks in his mirror are ever widening and his memory is increasingly unreliable as he becomes more and more unstable.

John Wade attempts to reunify his narrative under his ultimate goal persona: that of politician. Being a soldier is a stepping-stone, but being a politician is his future. He achieves his political goals on a local level as Minnesota’s lieutenant governor, but his attempts to go Federal as a U.S. Senator is where everything begins to crumble. Wade is so good at creatively constructing his narrative that he is unable to own up to the truths of Vietnam, even when it might be in his favor to do so. The lies constructed behind the mirrors have protected him for so long that he cannot conceive of purposely shattering them with the truth. When the facts about the atrocities of My Lai cost him the election Wade completely unravels. He “felt the full crush

of defeat, the horror and humiliation, the end of everything he'd ever wanted for himself' (O'Brien 271). The revelation that he was at My Lai ruined any chance he had of being a U.S. Senator, but also outed one of his most closely held secrets. Although it was "more than the lost election" that crushed him, "[i]t was disgrace" (O'Brien 271) that truly defeated him. John Wade, who wanted "[o]nly to be loved" (O'Brien 59), found himself reviled as a loser. By that point, his entire identity – including those of magician, spy, husband, and Sorcerer – is wrapped up in being the politician. Without that persona the mirrors shatter. As Sorcerer he attempted to erase his part in My Lai so that he could become a politician, he tried to "pull off a trick that couldn't be done, which was to remake himself, to vanish what was past and replace it with things good and new" (O'Brien 234). He wanted to remake himself into someone who would never have participated in a massacre, someone who was principled and wanted to do good in the world. When his trick of erasure was exposed, it became more difficult for Wade to retreat behind his mirrors.

The destruction of his narrative as a politician potentially led John Wade to remove the last tether, he had to any sense of himself: his identity as Kathy's husband. Kathy disappears fairly early in the novel, and not even John Wade is entirely certain that he did not kill her. Their time in the cabin following the lost election came with "[t]oo many discontinuities, too many mind-shadows" (O'Brien 180) for John Wade. He was angry and seemed to lose the last of his grip on sanity as he boiled the potted plants alive and screamed "Kill Jesus" (O'Brien 49) into the air. He slips in and out of reality throughout the investigation, with memories of terrible things occasionally cropping up. Even if he did kill her, for John Wade this is one more awful memory that cannot be true so in his mind it is not. The exposure of My Lai, the lost election, and Kathy's disappearance strip away any narrative John Wade has until his only option is to

disappear too. He has one last trick up his sleeve, he is “Sorcerer now” (O’Brien 274). As he glides through the waterways intent on becoming lost, he is “inside the mirrors” (O’Brien 274). There is little left of John Wade, except what he created inside the mirrors.

John’s manipulation of reality only enhances his trauma as he refuses to concede to what Dori Laub, in “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle”, refers to as “the imperative to tell” (62). John Wade’s trauma is so extensive and acute that he needs to tell the story of that trauma in order to assimilate it into his personal narrative and truly heal from his dissociative state. The problem arises in that John lacks tools that would allow him to deal with his trauma in a healthy or productive manner. He feels that he cannot confront the truth of his trauma safely, even when it would be in his best interest as with revealing his culpability in My Lai to preserve his campaign, or when Kathy asks him repeatedly to share the burdens of his traumas in Vietnam with her. So, he keeps avoiding the need to tell his story over and over again in each successive iteration of persona and is in fact trying to rewrite his story of trauma and dissociation. Laub states that:

“there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*. The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues” (63).

Rather than tell his story over and over again, John runs from his story over and over again. His failure to integrate his various traumatic experiences into his personal narrative as “something that had happened in the past but was now over” (Kolk 182) leads to full dissociation from reality. In the past Wade used his various identities to create distance between their experiences

and actions and his own, but it was as much a trick he played on himself as it was an illusion he presented to others. While he wanted to pretend that his father's abuse was never real and that someone else spied on Kathy, John Wade was always conscious of the memoirs of the Magician and the Spy. None of his identities were truly separate from Wade, rather, they were masks he wore and discarded as needed. However, his insistence on keeping them separate from himself and each other makes it impossible for Wade to tell a unified story of self. Without that unified, collective story of self, Wade is incapable of telling the stories of his traumas, and therefore, of healing.

John Wade's narrative is one based on his ability to shape his existence into a more pleasant version of what he lives. With each new trauma: his father's abuse and death, Vietnam, the lost election, and Kathy's disappearance, a new fragment of Wade's identity is created to cope and to prop up the ideal of John Wade. When his entire self-narrative is exposed as a lie, the mirrors he used to reflect these fragments of identity fail him. The breakdown of everything that made him John Wade leads him to disappear from reality, as though he cannot exist in reality without the narrative of John Wade. All that is left is Sorcerer, and the possibility that he and Kathy pulled the trick off after all. A new narrative for a new John Wade perhaps.

*In the Lake of the Woods* divulges the effects of untreated trauma on personal narratives, and how humans rely on stories in order to create their identity. When the stories they tell themselves are built on lies and repeatedly fail to live up to reality, that identity crumbles. John Wade became a hollow construction of ephemera because with each new trauma he created a new fragment of self that was separate from the previous identity, and while they sometimes worked in concert with each other they never formed a whole. The lack of unity and instability brought on by trauma left John with no way to discern between fiction and reality. This coping

mechanism is dangerous because since John could become anyone within the mirror, he became no one. He became just another person who disappears. By understanding that humans create their identities through narrative we can better understand that in order to heal from trauma, the traumatic event must be integrated into the personal narrative. Not as something that continually intrudes, but as something that is past.

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