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# The Changing Face of War: Representations of Modern Warfare in Select 20th and 21st Century Literature in *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque and *The Things they carried* by Tim O'Brien

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**ABSTRACT:** This dissertation explores representations of modern warfare in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried*, examining themes such as trauma, masculinity, and moral ambiguity. Through comparative literary analysis, it highlights how war literature reflects shifting experiences and psychological impacts of 20th and 21st-century conflicts. Keywords: modern warfare, war literature, trauma, masculinity, moral ambiguity, comparative literary analysis, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Things They Carried*, psychological impact, 20th and 21st-century conflict.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The representation of war in literature has long been a powerful medium through which writers explore the human condition, grapple with moral complexities, and confront the consequences of conflict. From the epic poems of Homer to the modern narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, war has served as a canvas upon which the heroism, futility, trauma, and transformation of combatants are vividly portrayed. Literary depictions of war have also changed over time, reflecting the shifting ideologies, technologies, and psychological landscapes of each era, just as warfare itself has changed, moving from traditional battles to mechanized destruction and guerrilla tactics. This dissertation, titled *The Changing Face of War: Representations of Modern Warfare in Select 20th and 21st Century Literature in All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque and The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien*, investigates how these two seminal works represent modern warfare and its complex implications. This study shows how literary narratives have changed to reflect the profound shifts in the way wars are fought and understood by looking at themes like mechanization, trauma, masculinity, moral ambiguity, and camaraderie. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, published in 1929, is a German novel that captures the visceral experience of a young soldier during World War I. Remarque, himself a veteran, brings to life the brutality and senselessness of trench warfare. The novel was one of the first to give an honest, unflinching account of how modern warfare affects people's minds and bodies. It departs from patriotic glorification, instead portraying soldiers as victims caught in a machine of destruction beyond their comprehension or control. The narrative is rooted in the experience of Paul Bäumer, a young German soldier, whose gradual disillusionment and emotional deterioration reflect the collapse of romantic ideals of war.

In contrast, *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, deals with the Vietnam War and its lingering impact on American soldiers. Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam veteran, combines autobiography and fiction to convey the difficulties of storytelling and the complexities of war memory. Unlike traditional war narratives that emphasize heroism and linear plots, O'Brien's collection of interlinked stories fragments reality and bends truth to convey the emotional truth of war. The stories explore not only the battlefield but also the burden of memory, survivor's guilt, and the impossibility of communicating trauma to those who have not experienced it. O'Brien's narrative challenges the notion of a single, objective war story, offering instead a mosaic of experiences shaped by fear, shame, and love.

## II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* are set in World War I and the Vietnam War, two of the most significant and traumatic conflicts of the 20th century. These wars, though



separated by nearly fifty years, marked significant shifts in the global understanding of warfare and its impact on the individual soldier. The historical, cultural, and political contexts in which these novels were written deeply inform their themes, characterizations, and narrative techniques.

The 1914–1918 World War I was a break in the conventional conceptions of warfare. It was the first modern war with mass casualties, mechanized combat, and trench warfare. Often referred to as “the war to end all wars,” it resulted in an unprecedented loss of life and a deep questioning of previously held beliefs about honor, duty, and nationalism. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was published in 1929, more than a decade after the armistice, during a time when Europe was grappling with the consequences of the war and the looming threat of fascism. Germany, in particular, was undergoing a period of political upheaval and social instability.

In contrast, *The Things They Carried* is rooted in the socio-political turmoil of the Vietnam War era (1955–1975), a conflict that divided the United States and generated significant public protest. The war was marked by guerrilla warfare, unclear objectives, and a growing media presence that brought graphic images of combat into American homes. The disillusionment with political leadership, the moral ambiguity of American involvement, and the draft system that disproportionately affected working-class and minority youth contributed to widespread dissent. By the time Tim O’Brien published his book in 1990, the United States was in the midst of reevaluating its role in the Vietnam War. This critical perspective is reflected in O’Brien’s work, which emphasizes soldiers’ psychological burdens and the difficulty of telling the truth about war. Both novels emerge from periods of reckoning.

### III. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erich Maria Remarque, born Erich Paul Remark in Osnabrück, Germany in 1898, was a veteran of World War I. He was conscripted into the German army at the age of 18 and wounded on the Western Front. His first-hand experiences of the brutality and senselessness of trench warfare shaped his worldview and inspired his most famous novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). The novel was an immediate success and gained international acclaim for its unflinching portrayal of war from the perspective of a common soldier. Remarque’s portrayal of the young German soldier Paul Bäumer provided a potent counterpoint to the romanticized and nationalistic narratives of war that were prevalent in Germany after World War II. However, the novel also drew strong criticism from right-wing factions and was banned and burned by the Nazis after they came to power. Remarque later fled Germany, eventually settling in Switzerland and then the United States, where he continued to write anti-war novels and screenplays until his death in 1970.

Both authors have been celebrated for their contributions to war literature. Remarque’s work remains a cornerstone of anti-war writing in Europe, while O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* has become a staple of American literary education and veteran discourse. Remarque and O’Brien share a commitment to conveying the lived realities of war, despite their differences in nationality, era, and literary form. Their novels challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths and to reconsider the glorification of conflict. They contribute to a larger literary tradition that seeks to humanize war victims, criticize its perpetuation, and document war.

### IV. MECHANISATION OF VIOLENCE

The mechanisation of violence marks a pivotal transformation in the nature and conduct of warfare in the 20th and 21st centuries. Literary works like *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien show how industrialization, technology, and mechanized weaponry have changed not only the battlefield but also the human experience of war. These works not only tell stories about war, but they also criticize the cold efficiency of machines and the ways in which this impersonal force has made soldiers less human, blurred moral lines, and made traditional notions of heroism and honor more difficult to understand. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, mechanisation is at the very heart of Remarque’s portrayal of World War I. The Western Front is portrayed as a brutal arena dominated by artillery bombardments, gas attacks, and unrelenting machine gun fire rather than as a space for individual combat. The trench warfare system itself—emblematic of WWI—becomes a mechanical structure that traps and consumes soldiers like cogs in an unrelenting machine.

Fast forward to the Vietnam War, as represented in *The Things They Carried*, and mechanisation evolves into an even more complex system. Here, the presence of helicopters, automatic rifles, claymore mines, and napalm reflects not only technological progress but also the alienation of soldiers from the violence they inflict. O’Brien’s narrative captures how technology distances the individual from the consequences of their actions. For instance, the ubiquitous helicopters serve as both omens and saviors, reminding soldiers of their mortality and the omnipresence of war at the



same time. These machines dominate the skyline and the soundscape, contributing to a war environment that is invasive and inescapable.

## **V. MORAL AMBIGUITY OF MODERN WARFARE**

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer and his comrades are conscripted into a war they do not understand, fighting for a cause that feels increasingly distant and abstract. The German soldiers are not motivated by patriotism or ideology, but by the instinct to survive. Paul frequently expresses his disappointment with the lauded notions of nationalism and honor used to justify the war in his reflections. From a distance, he questions the legitimacy of those who orchestrate the conflict and observes the senselessness of the violence. His realization that the alleged enemy, the French soldier, is no different from himself highlights this ethical dissonance. In the infamous shell-hole scene, after killing the Frenchman in hand-to-hand combat, Paul is wracked with guilt and questions the very foundation of the war's morality. "Why don't they tell us that you're like us, poor devils?" he wonders, drawing attention to the shared humanity that war obscures.

Similarly, in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien illustrates how the Vietnam War's moral framework is riddled with contradictions and uncertainties. Throughout the stories, the internal conflict between morality and military duty is present. In addition, O'Brien's narrative structure, which incorporates elements of fiction and reality, emphasizes moral ambiguity even more. The deliberate blurring of the line between fabrication and truth suggests that moral clarity is just as elusive in memory and narrative as it is in war itself. The stories raise ethical questions regarding representation and remembrance by asking whether telling the literal truth or emotional truth is more important.

## **VI. STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF PROCESSING TRAUMA**

Storytelling emerges as a crucial means by which soldiers deal with the effects of war in both *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried*. These narratives serve as therapeutic spaces where the horrors of combat, the burden of guilt, and the fragmentation of identity can be confronted and expressed rather than simply recounting events. The authors offer survivors of the unspeakable a psychological and emotional survival strategy through storytelling. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* exemplifies this theme most overtly. The book is metafictional in nature, blending fact with fiction, memory with imagination. O'Brien, who appears as both author and character, often interrupts the narrative to question the truthfulness of his own stories. The complexity of trauma itself, which resists coherent, linear narration, is reflected in this deliberate blurring of fact and fiction. In the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien suggests that truth in war is not necessarily factual but emotional: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue... If a story seems moral, do not believe it." Trauma narratives, which frequently rely on repetition, fragmentation, and contradiction to convey experiences that defy articulation, place a strong emphasis on emotional truth over factual accuracy. The act of storytelling becomes a form of catharsis for O'Brien and his fellow soldiers. They are able to make sense of their fractured selves, cope with loss, and preserve memories thanks to it. Through repeated retellings, the characters confront their pain and guilt, particularly in the deaths of comrades like Kiowa and Ted Lavender. O'Brien admits that writing these stories is a way to keep the dead alive, to momentarily restore what war has taken.

## **VII. SURVIVOR'S GUILT AND TRAUMA**

Survivor's guilt and trauma are recurring emotional and psychological states experienced by characters in both *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried*. These works portray not only the horrors of combat but also the enduring inner wounds carried by those who survive. Emotional numbness, flashbacks, guilt, and a fragmented sense of self are all manifestations of the inability to reconcile the immense burden of having lived while comrades perished. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien explores survivor's guilt as a central theme, especially in the chapters dealing with the deaths of Ted Lavender and Kiowa. Lavender's death is attributed to Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who he believes was distracted from his duties by his interest in a domestic partner. In a similar vein, various characters, including Norman Bowker, the unnamed narrator, and others, feel a sense of collective guilt when Kiowa dies in the mud of a field. Particularly, Bowker struggles greatly with the aftermath, unable to find closure or meaning. The psychological toll of unresolved guilt and trauma over time can be seen in his postwar isolation and eventual suicide. O'Brien's semi-autobiographical narrator uses storytelling as a method of wrestling with survivor's guilt. Writing becomes a way to remember the dead and forgive them, a way to give them a voice and keep a spiritual connection with them. He acknowledges that some narratives are written to save himself rather than to impart information. O'Brien makes a significant assertion about the transformative, if not redemptive, power of narrative in dealing with trauma in this manner.

## **VIII. THE SOLDIER'S EXPERIENCE OF TIME AND SPACE**

Paul Bäumer's perception of time is altered in *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a result of his time spent at the front. Days blend into nights, and weeks pass with little distinction. The soldiers frequently don't pay attention to the calendar or clock, so they use the rhythms of bombardment, hunger, or fatigue to tell the time. This suspension of chronological time emphasizes the surreal nature of life at the front. Paul frequently describes the front as existing in a parallel reality, cut off from the world of civilians. For him, time becomes a loop of repetition—waiting, fighting, resting, and repeating. Beyond the next battle, there is no known future, and the past becomes increasingly difficult to access, making it difficult for soldiers to locate a meaningful time continuum. Space too becomes unrecognizable and disorienting. There is no clear spatial logic in the trenches, dugouts, and shell-cratered landscapes. The front is not just a physical location but a psychological zone of dread and detachment. When compared to the vast terror of the battlefield, Paul's visits home during leave only serve to accentuate this dislocation. Civilian spaces now feel foreign, small, and trivial. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's portrayal of time is fragmented and non-linear, mirroring the effects of trauma on memory. Underscoring how trauma disrupts the ability to experience time sequentially, the narrative alternates between Vietnam-era and postwar reflections. The past haunts the characters as they continue to live in the present. For instance, Norman Bowker drives around a lake in circles, which is a metaphor for his inability to move forward after the war. O'Brien himself frequently recalls traumatic events, implying that the present is constantly influenced by the past. Spatial disorientation is equally prominent in O'Brien's work.

## **IX. THE ROLE OF CAMARADERIE AND ISOLATION IN WARFARE**

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer's emotional endurance and survival are largely dependent on his companionship. In the midst of the chaos, Paul's friends, particularly Katczinsky, provide a brief sense of normalcy and comfort. These bonds are born not out of shared ideology, but necessity and empathy. The soldiers share food, protect one another, and find solace in crude humor and shared routines. When Kat dies, Paul is devastated, and his grief illustrates how essential these relationships have become in the absence of family or national purpose. In the novel by Remarque, camaraderie is not sentimental; rather, it is honest, desperate, and entirely human. However, this closeness is counterbalanced by isolation. Paul's feelings of alienation from people who aren't at the front are getting worse, especially from civilians and authority figures who don't understand the true horrors of war. His inability to relate to his former life deepens his solitude. Even among his comrades, moments of silence and emotional withdrawal are frequent, as each soldier bears the weight of personal trauma.

Similarly, in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien presents camaraderie as a coping mechanism. The soldiers' emotional support and protection come from one another. Characters like Kiowa, Rat Kiley, and Henry Dobbins provide stability amid the uncertainty of combat. The act of sharing burdens—whether physical like equipment or emotional like grief—is vital. Because each soldier carries not only weapons and gear, but also memories, fears, and shared histories, the title itself speaks to this interdependence. However, the novel also emphasizes the sense of isolation felt by each soldier. After the war, many veterans, like Norman Bowker, struggle with loneliness and disengagement due to the loss of comrades.

## **X. WAR AS A COMING-OF-AGE EXPERIENCE**

War frequently acts as a furnace in which young people lose their innocence and quickly become mature. War functions as a rite of passage in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried*, replacing conventional rites of passage with brutal life lessons rooted in violence, trauma, and survival. Tim O'Brien and Erich Maria Remarque both depict young soldiers who are forced into the chaos of battle, where they undergo extreme emotional and psychological maturation, rather than advancing into adulthood through education, relationships, or careers. Paul Bäumer, the protagonist of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, begins the story as a young man full of optimism who has been persuaded to enlist in the war by his teachers and national propaganda.

Similarly, in *The Things They Carried*, the young men who populate Tim O'Brien's stories undergo an accelerated form of maturation. Characters such as Tim, Jimmy Cross, and Norman Bowker are introduced as ordinary young men with aspirations, fears, and romantic interests. Their service in Vietnam, on the other hand, becomes the turning point in their lives and fundamentally alters their identities. Particularly, Tim, the narrator, recalls his younger self with a mixture of distance and sadness, realizing that the war forced him to make choices that were beyond his emotional capabilities. The act of storytelling becomes a means of revisiting that formative period and coming to terms with the irreversible changes it brought.

## **XI. SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY IN WAR LITERATURE**

Remarque conveys the desolation of the battlefield through stark and vivid imagery in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The trench becomes a symbol of both protection and entrapment—a space where soldiers are shielded from bullets but not from the psychological horrors of war. The recurring image of the earth is particularly powerful because it is depicted both as a grave that swallows the dead and as a maternal presence that cradles the soldiers during bombardments. The ambiguity of nature as both a source of life and a source of death is reflected in this dual nature. Additionally, Remarque frequently depicts soldiers' dehumanization through animal imagery. Paul describes his comrades as becoming “wild beasts,” driven by instinct rather than reason, underscoring how war strips individuals of their humanity.

The novel makes frequent use of images of mutilated bodies, destroyed landscapes, and senseless suffering to emphasize the grotesque effects of mechanized warfare. These depictions are not only graphic, but also symbolic of the broken world the soldiers live in, one without logic, mercy, or morality. Similarly, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is replete with symbolic elements that encapsulate the psychological burdens of war. The titular “things” are both literal—helmets, rations, letters—and metaphorical—grief, guilt, fear. The soldiers' emotional and spiritual weight is reflected in each item they carry.

## **XII. REPRESENTATION OF WAR AND MASCULINITY**

In *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque, masculinity is first portrayed through national pride and stoicism. Paul Bäumer and his classmates are taught that a true man is brave, patriotic, and unflinching in the face of danger. However, these ideals quickly dissolve as the horrors of the battlefield reveal the futility of such notions. The trench becomes a place not of glory but of fear, vulnerability, and physical decay. Masculinity, rather than being a source of strength, becomes a fragile performance that soldiers must maintain to survive both socially and emotionally among their peers. Paul's internal monologue often exposes the contradictions between what is expected of men and what they actually feel. The myth that men are emotionally inert or inherently violent is challenged by his frequent episodes of fear, grief, and a desire for human connection. O'Brien also looks at the burdens men face during wartime in *The Things They Carried*, particularly the need to always appear brave. The title itself references not only the physical items soldiers carry but also the emotional and psychological weights they bear. Characters like Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and Norman Bowker embody the internal conflict between societal ideals of masculinity—stoicism, leadership, heroism—and their actual emotional states, marked by guilt, shame, and longing. When O'Brien writes about his own fear of going to war and the shame he felt for thinking about deserting, he explicitly criticizes the pressure to conform to masculine ideals. This personal account becomes a broader commentary on how men are socialized to equate bravery with suppressing vulnerability.

## **XIII. THE ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT IN LITERATURE**

Both *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried* focus on anti-war sentiment. The bleak realities of war and the emotional and psychological toll it takes on those involved are presented in these literary works, which challenge the glorification of war. Tim O'Brien and Erich Maria Remarque position their novels as profound statements against the destructiveness of war by providing vivid and eloquent critiques of the ideologies that fuel military conflicts. Remarque takes a clear and uncompromising anti-war stance in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Through the eyes of Paul Bäumer, the reader is introduced to the disillusionment that young soldiers experience when they realize that the romantic notions of heroism and honor in battle are cruel myths.

Similarly, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* articulates a strong anti-war message through its fragmented structure and blending of fact and fiction. O'Brien considers the emotional burdens—fear, guilt, and loss—that soldiers carry long after the fighting has ended. His narrative questions the very nature of truth in war stories, emphasizing that the emotional truth of an experience may be more significant than literal events. This perspective challenges traditional war narratives that focus on valor and sacrifice. Instead, O'Brien highlights the absurdity and moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War, presenting it not as a noble cause but as a deeply confusing and traumatic experience for those involved.

## **XIV. CONCLUSION**

The study of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* reveals the development of war narratives throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly in terms of how they depict contemporary warfare. These texts provide profound insights into the psychological, emotional, and societal



impacts of war, highlighting the ways in which mechanised violence, moral ambiguity, and emotional trauma permeate the lives of soldiers and civilians alike.

Remarque and O'Brien do not present war as a site of glory or triumph but as a space of dehumanization, suffering, and loss. Their works criticize the destructive power of nationalism and the loss of personal identity in the face of the state apparatus. They expose the internal and external wounds inflicted on those who serve, challenging idealized versions of masculinity and the romanticized heroism often associated with military service.

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