

An Equal and Opposite Reaction: Dialectic
Relationships in *In the Lake of the Woods*

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The end of Tim O'Brien's novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, finds its enigmatic protagonist adrift on the lake, floating northward into the oblivion of an early Canadian winter. As he loses himself in the wilderness, O'Brien describes how "in all directions, there was only the vast ongoing freeze, everything in correspondence, [forming] an icy latticework of valences and affinities." [8, p. 303] The same could be said of the novel itself, with its charged pairings of memories and evidence, of objective truths and unquestioned assumptions. These may seem to be complete opposites, but a closer look reveals that they allow dialectic relationships to come into play at a variety of levels. In many of his works, this one included, O'Brien plays with the difference between what "actually" happened, and the story of what happened. Time and again, he revisits certain aspects of John Wade's past, and with each telling adds or erases certain key details. A similar tension exists between the alternating lists of objective evidence and subjective chapters of pure hypothesis. On a larger scale, that same tension enters into the relationship between the reader and the text. While one initially has every reason to believe that the narrator knows what happened to John and Kathy Wade, the narrator's claim to objective knowledge deteriorates as the story progresses. In all of these cases, raw data feeds supposition— which in turn influences what facts are deemed important and which are ignored. Throughout the novel, O'Brien uses the stress and interplay between opposites to investigate what distinguishes dreams, memories, text and narration from reality.

To hear Freud tell it, the unconscious is powerless against the strong, restric-

tive forces that the conscious mind foists upon it. Most people, after all, impose moral filters on their unconscious desires, which distort the wishes as they infiltrate dreams and everyday life. The unconscious, however, doesn't seem to have a direct way of combating this repressive regime of manners, morals and societal conventions. To quote a common saying, though, "extremes often meet." Derrida might explain this by pointing out that one cannot define something without bringing its opposite into play. A Marxist might go further, pointing out that the conscious and unconscious form a dialectic relationship, such that any change on the one side leads to a complementary shift in the other. To put the argument into more concrete terms, consider of effects of imposing physical restraints on one's body. Wearing a tightly laced corset reshapes the underlying bones and organs, rearranging the body it is designed to control. In response to those changes, a new set of controls may be called for: smelling salts or stronger laces, for instance. If one relates one's dream filters to something more physically restrictive, such as nineteenth century undergarments, it is easy to see how they can shape the unconscious, and how those changes can in turn modify those original conscious restraints.

This dynamic interplay between conscious filters and the unconscious fears they repress operates on two distinct levels throughout the novel. The pattern most noticeably surfaces in John Wade's reactions to trauma, first at My Lai and again after losing his wife. Time after time, Wade refuses to acknowledge the horror of what has happened. Even in the midst of the massacre at My Lai, he so adamantly refuses to process what is happening that "in the months and

years ahead, [he] would remember Thuan Yen¹ the way chemical nightmares are remembered... and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory. [It] could not have happened. Therefore it did not.” [8, p.108-109] Rather than face the physical and moral carnage and take responsibility for his share in it, Wade tries to relabel his memories, to relegate them to the dream-realm of “impossible events.” By shoving the terror into unconsciousness, Wade puts those memories under the lock and key of his pre-existing moral filters. The altered unconscious, however, puts increased strain on those filters, which in turn effect what can and cannot make itself known to his waking mind. “After what happened at Thuan Yen,” Wade therefore finds that he has “lost touch with some defining part of himself,” and often goes “out of his way to [engage in]...acts of erasure,...of burying one great horror under the weight of many smaller horrors.” [8, p.147-148] In other words, parts of his psyche that had previously seemed harmless become blocked, while a host of “smaller horrors” are suddenly allowed to slip through, balancing out the pressure caused by keeping that “one great horror” from surfacing. Here, it is easy to see how Wade’s conscious mind and subconscious fears play upon and modify each other.

We see the same cycle at play in the events surrounding Kathy’s disappearance, but twenty years of cat-and-mouse games between the horror in his past and the increasingly ineffective methods he uses to repress it have pushed John Wade’s filters deep into left field. From trying to go on “from year to year

¹Thuan Yen is another name for the village of My Lai

without letting on that there were tricks,”[8, p. 46] to yelling “loud, obscene things” in his sleep[8, p. 75], to venting his wrath on house-plants in a late night herbicide rampage, larger and larger chunks of repressed rage and horror have been allowed to slip out into the open. While the pressures have grown too large for Wade to repress entirely, however, his moral filters are still at work. Even if they cannot prevent him from steaming geraniums, they can still expunge the memory of doing so from his waking mind. He simply spaces out “for an indeterminate time...watching the mirrors in his head flicker with radical implausibilities” on the night that Kathy disappears.[?, p. 51] When one method of repression breaks down, another one comes into play. Here, then, we see the drastic effects of the dialectic interplay between the memories John Wade tries to submerge and the repressive mechanisms that he uses to do the trick.

On a more fundamental level, however, the theme of knowledge and repression wends its way through the unnamed narrator’s quest to piece together what has happened to John and Kathy Wade. In much the same way that John Wade tries to determine what happened to his wife, the narrator tries to figure out what, exactly, made John Wade tick. In both cases, however, the most important information proves the most difficult to unearth. Kathy’s sister Patricia, who knew more about John than any of the other characters still available for questioning, remains tight-lipped throughout the course of the novel. Even though she seems like a peripheral character in many ways, a Freudian analysis would pick her out as one of those “stupid little detail[s that] can jump up and wiggle its ass and turn awful damn smart.”[8, p. 123] As Freud points out, in

dreams one's moral filters tend to shunt one's unpleasant urges into seemingly innocuous, unobtrusive objects. Not surprisingly, Patricia reveals the depth of her knowledge in the very process of evading the narrator's questions. For example, she states that Kathy told her "how he'd wake up screaming sometimes. Foul language, which [she] won't repeat. In fact, [she'd] rather not say anything at all." [8, p. 29] In the process of stone-walling, Patricia inadvertently shows how close she is to the secrets at the core of her sister's marriage. The restrictions she tries to enforce, along with the inherent difficulty of unravelling what happened to Kathy and John, react back on the narrator, merely feeding his obsessive need to know what happened. As he explains in a footnote, "eternal doubt...both frustrates and fascinates. It's a standoff. The human desire for certainty collides with our love of enigma." [8, p. 266] In other words, knowing more just shows the narrator the depth of his own ignorance— which modifies the type of secret he wants to understand. At the start of the novel, he wants to know what happened to John Wade. By the time we reach the last page, though, his goals have changed; he wants to understand how to resolve the mystery posed by other, implacably foreign people. Interrogating human filters like Patricia has provided him with more insight into what happened, which in turn causes him to re-evaluate why he cares. Here again, we see how knowledge and repression are both intimately linked and diametrically opposed to each other.

Another opposition that O'Brien toys with in this novel involves the relationship between the text and the reader. In this case, Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* provides a good framework for examining how O'Brien

manipulates the boundary between readers and the novel's text. Fish argues that a significant part of any work's meaning is constructed by its readers. In a sense, the author does not have to tell the whole story for its meaning to be clear; he simply has to touch upon key phrases that clue readers in to what he means. As Garrison Kiellor puts it, "All you have to do is mention the traveler coming home on a summer night at dinner time. The audience will fill in the way the light comes out of the dining room windows and the smell of fried chicken wafting down the path." In other words, a work's readership houses a vast, communal repository of meanings associated with the words the page; all the author has to do is tap in at the right spots. In order to flesh out what the author has written, however, readers have to make number of assumptions. As Fish states, "the stability of interpretation (at least among certain groups at certain times)...[depends upon] the notion of *interpretive communities*...[which] are made up of those who share interpretive strategies." [3, p. 171] The imaginative fleshing-out of a text, then, relies on the fact that readers are apt to follow a particular rubric in forming their conjectures. An author must therefore be aware of that rubric in order to shape his narrative effectively. As Fish states, "these [interpretive] strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around." [3, p. 171] Put differently, the readership's collective set of assumptions forms its own kind of language. Just as the link between sounds or written symbols and meanings is ultimately arbitrary, so too is the relationship between any given literary pattern and the significance it holds for its readers.

Language is the author's medium; hence, he must be aware of and employ this often unacknowledged branch of language in his work. In this way, the reigning ideology encoded in the dominant interpretive strategies reacts upon the text. In *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, O'Brien manipulates readers' interpretive strategies, revealing how subtle changes in the text can completely change what assumptions seem called for in grasping the novel.

O'Brien's use of subjunctive, conditional narrative plays with the pervasive assumption that all narrators are impartial and omniscient. The opening pages of the novel seem believable enough; the narrator describes, in the third person past tense, how John and Kathy Wade retreat to a cabin in the woods after John's crushing defeat in the primary. Like all standard novels, this one initially seems to organize "material around two basic narrative levels: a *then* of events and a *now* of telling." [4, p. 246] We readers make an assumption that seems so necessary and obvious that we're hardly aware of making it: we assume that the narrator knows what happened, and that his word can be trusted. O'Brien, however, has a penchant "for creating literary lies and narrative unreliability," [7, p.894] and while the next chapter does not yet reveal the extent of the narrator's ignorance, it does begin to push him off his narrative pedestal. That chapter, the first of many titled "Evidence," introduces a crowd of voices, all of whom tell a portion of the Wades' story. Here, we begin to see that the narrator is not the only person who can tell us what happened; in fact, he may not even be capable of telling us the story without a literary backup chorus. He goes on to admit as much at the end of the next evidence chapter, revealing that

“even after four years of hard labor [he is] left with little more than supposition and possibility.” [8, p. 30] This confession not only shakes up our unquestioning acceptance of the lines the narrator feeds us, but also raises the point that we readers, as an interpretive community, are responsible for constructing a coherent tale out of the scatter-shot collection of evidence; as the narrator goes on to point out, “Evidence is not truth. It is only evident.” [8, p. 30] If we glean any meaning at all from this story, he seems to say, it isn’t his fault. We, the readers, are largely responsible for connecting the dots and drawing our own pictures from between the lines.

As the novel progresses, readers may also start to wonder just who the anonymous narrator is. A short biography in the front of the book tells us that, like the narrator, Tim O’Brien served as a foot soldier in Vietnam. Like the narrator, too, O’Brien is a writer. Just how thin is the line separating O’Brien from the voice leaking out from between the novel’s footnotes?² Questions like this make us increasingly aware that the narrative hangs together only by the interpretive constructs we, the readers, apply to it. As a writer who is obviously attuned to those common interpretive strategies, O’Brien modifies the text to mirror those assumptions. After readers get their heads around his destabilizing narrative tricks, they start viewing the novel as a collective effort, as something constructed between themselves, the author, and the available facts. In response to this change of view, O’Brien shifts the novel’s tone from authoritative to conversation. In the final chapter, for instance, he calls out

²It seems ironic that footnotes, usually responsible for shoring up a work’s authenticity, serve here to introduce even more uncertainty into the story.

to the readers, asking if a certain hypothesis is, “too sentimental? Would we prefer a wee-hour boiling? A teakettle and scalded flesh?” [8, p.300] As he goes on to point out in the corresponding footnotes, what we decide to believe is an individual “matter of taste, or aesthetics...It’s a judgment call.” [8, p. 300] In response to the altered assumptions that his “narrative and biographical games” have presented to his audience, O’Brien transforms his text. [7, p. 905] The narration reacts upon the ideologies of the interpretive community, which in turn modify the novel’s structure; once again, we see how the (sub)text reacts back on the very interpretive strategies that shape it.

A novel about the aftershocks following the Vietnam War does not, at first, seem like the most likely place to find ideas borrowed from Marx. *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, pits readers’ assumptions and the world’s epistemological restraints against a fluid text and the human need for closure. The relationships that arise between these apparent contrasts show how much influence opposites exert on each other. Marx originally used the word “dialectic” to refer to the ever-changing stream of feedback between political subtexts and reigning ideologies. It applies equally well, however, to the flexible bonds between opposites in O’Brien’s novel.

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