

The Gender Trap in Tim O'Brian's "The Things They Carried"

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After the death of one of his men, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the protagonist of Tim O'Brian's *The Things They Carried*, projects his own "feminine" characteristics onto the absent Martha as a way of denying them and reconstituting himself as the masculine soldier he thinks he ought to be. In doing so, some feminist critics believe Cross deliberately marginalizes and scapegoats Martha, making her a victim. This assessment is correct, with a single caveat: Lt. Cross is as much a "victim" of his projections as Martha -- perhaps more so.

Critic Lorrie N. Smith, in her article "The Things Men Do: The Gendered Subtext of Tim O'Brian's *Esquire* Stories," asserts that *The Things They Carried* is essentially an initiation story, in which "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's survival and his coming of age as an effective soldier depend on letting go of all that is not necessary and immediate -- here equated completely with the feminine, the romantic, the imaginary. Becoming a warrior entails a pattern of desire, guilt, and renunciation in relation to women." (Smith, 24) However, when we first meet Jimmy Cross, he has yet to make this transformation. Rather, he is a young man who carries Martha's letters with him, wondering earnestly whether she is a virgin, "imagining romantic camping trips into the White Mountains of New Hampshire," and, more than anything, wanting Martha "to love him as he loved her." (1253) Cross also keeps two photographs of Martha:

The first was a Kodachrome snapshot signed 'Love,' though he knew better. She stood against a brick wall. Her eyes were gray and neutral, her lips slightly open as she stared straight on at the camera... (In) the second photograph... Martha's left knee was cocked... Cross remembered touching that left knee. A dark theater, he remembered, and the movie was *Bonnie and Clyde*... when he touched her knee, she turned and looked at him in a sad, sober way that made him pull his hand back.

He remembered kissing her goodnight at the dorm door. Right then, he thought, he should've done something brave. He should have carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to

the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should have risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should've done. (1255)

Critic Smith writes that "we are meant to see the move from chivalry to sado-masochistic erotica as natural and understandable, because 'he was just a kid at war, in love,' after all. That Jimmy Cross's sexual 'bravery' might have been earned through violation and coercion is not considered in the story. The focus is on the male's empowering fantasy." (Smith, 25) To be sure, O'Brian's descriptions of Jimmy and his thoughts betray the character's callowness and twisted conception of "bravery," but much more importantly, they also betray the inculcated male attitudes that Cross has absorbed. If Cross perceives Martha as the eroticized, objectified Other, as Smith rightfully observes, it is crucial to understand that these perceptions are in large measure a product of the patriarchal social system he has grown up in. This does not excuse Cross from the moral implications of his attitudes, either at this point in the story or later on, but nonetheless highlights the central truth of the story's gender subtext: gender roles, predilections, and attendant behavior patterns are socially constructed -- and men, as well as women, are obliged to suffer the consequences. As a close reading of the above excerpts indicate, Cross is as spiritually hobbled by the masculine stereotypes he's internalized as the woman he fantasizes about. The irony, of course, is that from the story's beginning to its end, Jimmy remains largely oblivious to this fact.

For Jimmy, Martha -- or rather, the idea of Martha -- is both a means of escaping the monotony and senseless horror of war and, simultaneously, a persistent distraction that may get him or his men killed: "His mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore with Martha." (1257) Just before Ted Lavender is killed, Lt. Cross waits anxiously as one of his men descends into a tunnel where VC guerrillas may be lurking. The tunnel, as critic Steven Kaplan notes (in "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brian's *The Things They Carried*"), is sexually suggestive; then, "suddenly, without willing it," Cross imagines he and Martha "buried alive under the weight (of) dense, crushing love." (1259) Cross is again lost in erotic fantasy and his

longing to know Martha's intimate secrets, to know *Martha*, has taken on new urgency. Critic Smith asserts that this point in the story marks the apex of Jimmy's desire to "merge with the feminine" within himself by craving psychological knowledge of, and sexual union with, the idealized feminine model of Martha. Cross is still objectifying Martha, but the fact that he wants to know her at all ("Why poetry? Why so sad? Why that grayness in her eyes? Why so alone?") indicates an aspiration, however inarticulate, to forge intimacy with Martha and understand her as a person, not a male fantasy. If we view Cross as representative of conventional masculinity, this aspiration hints at an unusual attempt to explore his "feminine side."

Yet when Ted Lavender is killed, Jimmy's nascent efforts to investigate such feelings are cut short. Jimmy's initial reaction bespeaks his cultural conditioning loud and clear:

He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence, Lavender was now dead... Later, when it was full dark, he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. It went on for a long while. In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would. (1262)

Instead of attributing Lavender's death to the arbitrary fortunes of war, or even to a lack of preparedness on his own part, Lieutenant Cross has internalized the masculine taboo against being subjugated by or "dependant" upon a woman -- even if she's thousands of miles away and a fantasy woman he knows little about. By traditional standards of masculinity, even if Martha were Jimmy's *wife*, it's likely that this taboo would still apply, regardless of his physical circumstances and doubly so in the case of war. To place a woman above the fellowship of other men, or the safety of your male comrades, would be seen as a sign of weakness, betrayal and stupidity; nowadays, they call it being "whipped." Unable to control his thoughts and fantasy's about Martha, Cross berates himself as an inferior exemplar of his what it means to be a man. Jimmy feels two strong emotions in the aftermath of Lavender's death -- one is self-hatred for his inability to prevent it, and the other, tellingly, is *shame*. Shame is not a form of self-recrimination that operates outside of a social

context; it is, rather, a potent method of ensuring conformity and sanctioning behavior deemed "inappropriate."

What is instructive about Jimmy's reaction is that it is entirely self-generated; none of his men actually blame him for Lavender's death, or try to shame him in any way. Instead, once again Cross internalizes the patriarchal system's dictum that *regardless* of his men's reaction, Jimmy *should* feel ashamed for placing Martha ahead of their interests, and he doesn't need another man to point this out. Hence he takes this sense of shame on himself automatically, an unwitting but obedient adherent to the masculine behavior patterns prescribed by his society. Yet contrary to critic Smith's contention, Lieutenant Cross doesn't move to scapegoat Martha with immediate and indiscriminate dispatch. The fact that Jimmy cries not so much for Ted Lavender but rather for the "death of his obsession with Martha" (as Steven Kaplan puts it) demonstrates that while Cross continues to objectify and project upon her, he is nonetheless capable of giving expression to his "feminine side." Jimmy's crying jag illustrates that he is neither wholly misogynist nor -- at least at this point -- completely unable to escape the constraints of socially constructed ideas of manhood. It is therefore a measure of the overwhelmingly pervasive influence of inculcated masculine attitudes that Cross subsequently feels *forced* to abjure Martha and all things feminine to reestablish his tenuous grasp on "manhood."

To that end, Jimmy performs two acts of ritual purgation which help him to retrieve "the mask of his composure." After the choppers evacuate Lavender's body, Lt. Cross leads his men into the village of Than Khe, where they burn everything, shoot chickens and dogs, and then "call in artillery (to) watch the wreckage." (1262) This act, which (as critic Smith notes) indirectly echoes the massacre of My Lai, represents Jimmy's response to threatening feelings of shame and inadequacy. Stereotypically male in character, Lt. Cross's reaction is to take out his anger on those who are weaker than he, and thereby reassert his masculinity. Jimmy's men participate in the torching of Than Khe with equal relish, using the tool of easy, cruel retribution to reconstitute their sense of manhood in like manner. Such behavior further strengthens the argument that the cultural

conditioning Cross and his men have received promotes wholesale, brute revenge as the predictable, even "natural" outcome of male rage. Cross and the men of Alpha Company aren't acting, they're reacting -- not just to Lavender's death, but also to their masculine training.

Jimmy's second act of "purification" is the burning of Martha's letters, which precedes his complete rejection of the feminine:

He realized it was only a gesture. Stupid, he thought. Sentimental, too, but mostly just stupid. Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame...

Half smiling, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross took out his maps. He shook his head hard, as if to clear it, then bent forward and began planning the day's march... They would do what they had always done... He was realistic about it. There was a new hardness in his stomach.

No more fantasies, he told himself.

Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the daydreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity. (1266)

"With this rejection," writes Lorrie Smith, "Jimmy Cross completes his transformation. His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity... he reverts to a familiar binary choice -- either Martha or his men." (Smith, 26)

Although Smith is substantially correct, she fails to mention that Lieutenant Cross's rejection of Martha and the feminine within himself is occasioned by at least some regret and genuine insight:

"Briefly, in the rain, Lieutenant Cross saw Martha's gray eyes gazing back at him. He understood. It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do.

He almost nodded at her, but didn't." (1266-67) However dimly, Jimmy knows what he's giving up.

The tragedy is that Cross feels compelled to sacrifice one aspect of himself to preserve another because his conditioning tells him that, essentially, he has no other choice. Jimmy's sense of self is so intertwined with conventional masculine stereotypes that deviating from them threatens his very identity. Hence, the objectified Martha becomes a ready scapegoat for Lavender's death and repository for all of Jimmy's denied feminine attributes. Even so, Cross chooses to amputate Martha

and what she represents from his thoughts not with delight or satisfaction but rather with a kind of disillusioned resignation.

In the end, the only way Lieutenant Cross feels he can reconstruct his identity is by hardening his heart and becoming the masculine ideal of the perfect soldier:

He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence. It wouldn't help Lavender, he knew that, but from this point on he would comport himself as a soldier... On the march he would impose strict field discipline. He would be careful to send out flank security, to prevent straggling or bunching up, to keep his troops moving at the proper pace and at the proper interval. He would insist on clean weapons. He would confiscate the remainder of Lavender's dope.

Later in the day, perhaps, he would call the men together and speak to them plainly. He would accept the blame for what had happened to Ted Lavender. He would be a man about it. He would look them in the eyes, keeping his chin level, and he would issue the new SOP's in a calm, impersonal tone of voice, an officer's voice, leaving no room for argument or discussion. Commencing immediately, he'd tell them, they would no longer abandon equipment along the route of march. They would police up their acts. They would get their shit together, and keep it together, and maintain it neatly and in good working order.

He would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself... his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor. (1267)

The fact that Cross seeks to restore his sense of self by adopting an ersatz, super-masculine identity supplies the ultimate evidence that as much as he victimizes the feminine by scapegoating Martha, Jimmy's victimization of himself is perhaps much worse. By rejecting his feminine characteristics and renouncing whatever individuality he possesses in favor of an impossibly one-dimensional, exaggerated version of the masculine warrior, Cross effectively strangles the life out of his "true self" -- whatever that is. The patriarchal society Jimmy has grown up in, with its traditional emphasis on sexual binary opposites, leaves Cross ill-equipped to even *consider* working through the conflicting impulses between his animus and anima (as Jung termed the male and female aspects intrinsic within each human being). Instead, Lieutenant Cross believes that it is easier -- safer -- to surrender his identity (his "Jimmy-ness," if you will) and don a macho facade in order to retain the illusion of a stable, integrated personality. It is deeply ironic that as Cross jettisons his feminine projections, he simply exchanges them for masculine ones -- for what is the male persona that Cross eventually embraces if not a caricature of Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne?

Ultimately, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is a classic example of the victim/victimizer. He is obliged by his cultural training to perpetuate a phalocentric system of values that effectively excludes and sanctions the feminine perspective (here represented by Martha), yet that very same system stunts his own development as an individual. The criticisms of Lorrie Smith and others regarding Jimmy's attitudes toward Martha are accurate and well-taken -- but we should remember that in *The Things They Carried*, the feminine viewpoint is not the only casualty of war.

Works Cited:

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