Disinvolvement as Repression: A Psychoanalytic Reading of O'Brien’s “Things They Carried”

A psychological analysis of the characters in Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” should be of great value, considering that O’Brien served during the Vietnam War and drew liberally from his experiences in his stories about it. The story is framed as an enumeration of the things that a platoon of American soldiers carry with them while stationed in war-enveloped Vietnam, with as much attention paid to the “emotional baggage” (356) that they carry in their minds as to their physical equipment. For Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the heaviest bit of such baggage is the comforts of home life as personified by Martha, a, to his mind, virginal innocent, whom he unrequitedly yearns for love from. He desires her because she is a nurturing, pure figure, a symbol of the beauty in the world that he would like to believe in and be a part of. The war, however, challenges this notion and spurs him to become mentally tougher so that he can better psychologically cope with his situation. In psychoanalytic terms, he attempts to repress his natural desire for pleasure and replace it with the securities of self-sufficient power and control. Love becomes an impractical, even harmful, thing to seek or even accept, and thus Cross’s most basic and pure personal drives are forced to be repressed and a persona of “impersonal” (358) harshness adopted.

Jimmy Cross’s case can be seen as being an extreme case of normal psychological restraint of desires for pleasure in response to the unnaturally distressing environment. “Were it not for the intervention of [rationality]... every instinct would know only one fate - that of gratification” (47), Anna Freud summarizes. Shortsighted urges are suppressed by us all, but Jimmy Cross and the other soldiers take this to a disturbingly extensive level. Cross, as the
platoon’s Lieutenant, decides that he has greater responsibility and therefore is attracted to the idea of a highly disciplined state of mind. As will be seen, he may in truth be using this primarily as a pretense, and contrarily, though apparently unconsciously, is more concerned with preemptively avoiding the potential pain that affection opens him up to. He continues to base his personal philosophy around maximizing his pleasure and comfort, but gives up believing that he could actually achieve them. Instead he aims to protect himself from pain and sadness, even at the cost of losing his receptivity to genuine pleasure.

All the “things” in the story carried (by choice), literal and figurative both, are carried for the sense of psychological comfort that they provide. Their behavior is similar to cases of children clinging to comfort objects of personal significance “in order not to become aware of some painful impression from without” (A. Freud 96). Symbols of comfort become psychological buffers, a method of denial (A. Freud 96-98). The soldiers are not neurotic in the conventional sense, they are in a dangerous environment, in which infantile, crude methods of comfort-seeking are called for due to, if nothing else, a lack of options. Some of the things they carry are relatively practical if pessimistic, such as Ted Lavender’s tranquilizers (345), while others are purely psychological, e.g., Kiowa’s New Testament. Most fall somewhere in between, as with the mine detector, which was “often useless because of the shrapnel in the earth, but they carried... anyway... for the illusion of safety” (349). Not all are so directly oriented towards being comforting or practical; the comics books carried by medic Rat Kiley (346) are neither purely symbolic comforts nor especially practical, but could function as a tool for escapism, surely a comforting release, especially for the injured. And while food is a necessity, “canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake” (344) would have to be classified as a luxury.

However, something being a luxury does not preclude it from being a so-called necessity: psychological coping mechanisms that may be, in an objective sense, luxuries, are allowed and
even tacitly encouraged for the men. The reality of the world is wholly terrifying. If the men are to have anything resembling a balanced psychological state, they must get their pleasure where they may. Martha, and the world of comfort she represents, is such a luxury for Cross, one that he later decides is doing more harm than good. This is also why the platoon is supplied with such frivolities as “sparklers for the Fourth of July” (353) and candy, some of which is matter-of-factly described as being specifically “for especially bad wounds” (346). If “premium dope” can for some individuals qualify as a “necessity” (345) then it stands to reason that, for the emotional eater, comfort food could also qualify. “Whatever gets you through the fight” appears to be the philosophy.

Even the basic organization structure and overarching premise of the story betrays a neurotic fixation on the quantifiable and controllable weight and tally of the things the soldiers carry, and foreshadows Cross’s commitment to becoming similarly unsentimental and pragmatic. It is one thing to complain about the weight in general. It is logical to think about what things are dispensable. But the attention that the narrator pays to the weights is extraordinarily detailed, and implies that such a fixation is common among the soldiers. Almost anytime a weapon or piece of equipment is mentioned (which occurs with as much regularity as plot development), its weight is also noted, from the 2.1 pound boots (345) to the ten-ounce rounds for the 5.9 pound grenade launcher (347) to the 30-pound (with battery) radio (352) and so on.

The certainty of these weights comforts the soldiers in the face of “all the ambiguities… mysteries and unknowns” (353). When death can come so suddenly, when a man can just go “boom-down” and collapse under all the weight “like cement” (347), with no warning or time to digest the event, anything certain becomes a comfort, even the “single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry” (353). The soldiers crave legitimate control, but this is hard to come by, so more infantile, long-repressed methods of finding senses of security are
indulged. The comfort of certainty is so infantile that it could be compared to the joy a baby gets from discovering that every time it shoves it's food, it falls down. Cross repeatedly calls Martha “uninvolved” (350, 353, 357), which superficially denotes her to be functionally powerless, but at the same time her distance makes her safe from the war. The continuation of her existence is dramatically more certain than those of the soldiers, a comfort to Cross for the plain certainty of it.

In the battles, when the anxiety of the soldiers is as pronounced as it can be, they unanimously succumb to the temptation of irrational, infantile self-comforting acts. They try to escape, or at least temper, the overwhelming external pressures by thinking of equally comforting things. These things have to be extreme given the unnaturally terrifying nature of the combat, just as Cross, on the other side of the spectrum, ultimately goes over-the-top in his attempt to repress comforting thoughts. They sob like babies unsure how else to get attention and beg “for the noise to stop.” They make “stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers…” (354-355). They call out to their personal personifications of the strong and loving, the beings who can and will keep them safe. But they do not just beg of these figures, they make promises. They in a sense try to woo them, in the unconscious, unthinking hopes of earning their commitment and love. By doing so, they would have the psychological appeal of being cared for. This is essentially the default state of mind for Cross until his decision to toughen up and banish Martha from his thoughts. That it is not so for the rest of the men prefigures Cross’s realization that it is untenable as an ongoing policy.

The main reason that Cross’s brand of psychological aversion, or “denial” as Anna Freud calls it, is not practiced by the men as a rule is not that it is impractical for their theoretical war-oriented purposes, it is their dedication to community. Their greatest fear is not death, but “the blush of dishonor” (356). They have their reputations, their standing within their little society,
a society that so heavily champions grit and discipline. Each soldier takes in that culture, and when it is coupled with the stark reality of a life-threatening existence, is obliged to turn to the comfort of being controlling and tough rather than loved. They dream of being weak, of being themselves at last relieved and “carried” (357) away by a mere bird, a natural force. But for the sake of each other, they do not act on these urges. Cross, perhaps in recognition of his greater responsibility as lieutenant, takes this the furthest. It is not exactly the fraternity of soldiers or humans, just as it is “not courage” (356). It is not out of love for each other, but fear. When they are described as being “too frightened to be cowards” (356) it is not the obvious fear of the war or enemy, nor that meritorious fear of letting their fellows down, but the pathetic, unsoldierly, unmanly, fear of “embarrassment” (356).

The language of the soldiers is a good indicator of their psychologically troubled state. Their “hard vocabulary” (355) primarily takes the form of dirty jokes (according to Freud, a psychological outlet for repressed anxiety (Newirth 558)) and sexualized language. The more nerve-wracking the situation, the more vulgar the language: “almost cut me a new asshole” (355) someone says after a firefight, while to be killed is to be “greased” (connotative of potentially sex-oriented lubrication) or “offed” (355) (often a reference for orgasm). Even the all-important term “hump” has a long history of meaning “to have sex with.” Their existence is as such linguistically framed as one long, if rough, sexual encounter.

Cross, while still letting himself find his comfort and security in the image of Martha, is particularly prone to indulging in sexual thoughts. His thoughts on Martha persistently dwell on the question of whether she is a virgin; the pebble she sends him as a good luck he (rorschach test style) visualizes as a reproductive process-connotating egg (348); he has fantasies about tying Martha to a bed and having sex with her (348) (a sign of his growing desire to possess more control in the world); and when he looks into a yonic tunnel in which one of his men has not
returned from scouting out, he thinks of Martha immediately after thinking that there may have been “trouble” (350). Clearly the image of her is a much-needed security blanket, one especially handy when the world is frightening for reasons of being a hole.

Just as “the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection… through love” (“Future of an Illusion” 30), Lieutenant Cross tries to garner a sense of protection out of his love for Martha. His attempts are a more abstract variation on another soldier’s psychological coping mechanism of carrying of “his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter” (349). The ability to believe that there is such a thing as love in the world alone would be a comfort to Cross, but because he knows she does not love him (344), the comfort he finds is weak.

When possible, things, both physical and abstract, not functioning as worthwhile providers of a sense of security or comfort are discarded “purely for comfort” (353). Rations and ammo are discarded without a care, as they are being resupplied daily; normally comfortably secure “helmets and flak jackets” (352) are taken off to “ease the strain” (353) of the afternoon heat. In accordance with this principle, Lieutenant Cross burns the letters and other tokens of Martha in the hopes that doing so will help him shed the weight of his attachment to the world of love she represents. He decides that it is a handicapping weight that he cannot afford to bear. As the platoon leader, he already has to shoulder “the responsibility for the lives of his men” (346), and as “intangibles” are considered to have “tangible weight” (356), there must be a limit to how much one man can bear.

No wonder Cross comes to believe that “Ted Lavender was dead because he loved [Martha] so much and could not stop thinking about her” (347). The weight of her on his mind prevents him from paying as much attention to discipline as he concludes that he should. This itself is not symbolism or psychological displacement, it is a literal observation of how his
thoughts gravitate towards her at the expense of the moment. Of note in this regard is the pebble good-luck charm that she sends him. Unwilling to lose track of it for an instant he carries it in his mouth and turns it around and around with his tongue, and while doing so has “difficulty keeping his attention on the war” (348) or worrying “about matters of security [for] he was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love” (350). At this point, he is not repressing his urges to think about comforting things, because he is desperate for pleasure.

Sigmund Freud wrote that “anything that directs the patient’s thoughts to [a] forbidden object, anything that brings him into intellectual contact with it, is just as much prohibited as direct physical contact” (“Totem and Taboo” 27), and given this, Cross’s decision to throw away all the objects which remind him of Martha is predictable. Cross is aware that burning the letters and pictures is “stupid” and “sentimental” (357), which is to say it is not the most efficient way to go about discarding the items. By making a “gesture” out of the process he continues to show that he cares. Learning from this perceived mistake, he plans to discard the pebble in a more nonchalant manner, such as dropping it along the trail, or taint its evocation of love by throwing it away with a slingshot (358), symbolically recontextualizing it as a weapon and a part of the world of violence.

Love is to blame not only for being a distraction, but as Cross learns when Ted Lavender dies under his command, for making him soft and vulnerable. “The man cares” (354) one man in the platoon notes, observing the tears that Cross cannot hold back (353). Cross does the math. He weighs the pros and cons and determines that the costs of love are not worth the comfort. He conforms to the hard world, repressing his infantile yearnings for love. He decides to “be a man about it,” for “his obligation was not to be loved but to lead” (358). He is referring to the love of his men, as he imagines their “grumbling” about his stricter command and forcing of discipline, but his statement is applicable to love in general. Like a child learning to repress their
instinctual, but socially unacceptable urges “by means of a moral code of exaggerated
strictness” (A. Freud 51). Lieutenant Jimmy Cross adapts to harsh realities by attempting to
repress his desire for affection (be it from Martha or his men) and replace it with a sense of
discipline and control for to feel less psychologically vulnerable.

Cross’s resolution to become tougher echoes the prevailing attitude of the platoon, right
down to the use of “a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness” (355), as seen in his
planned order for the men to “get their shit together” (358), with its emphatic yet controlled use of
profanity. He plans to distance himself, to become emotionally as “uninvolved” (353) as Martha is
physically and (evidenced by her never more than indirectly alluding to the war in her letters
(348)) mentally. He represses his humanity, disinvolves, and adapts to the world-defining
“hump,” to a “dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility”
(352) that yet imposes an aggressive and sexual tone onto the world, giving his fundamental
impulses an outlet. It is all that he can think to do.

Works Cited

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Abstract of Greg W. Zacharias’s “The extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me”: Fantasy and Confession in *The Turn of the Screw*

This paper examines the character of the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* through the lens of (primarily) a Lacanian language-based psychoanalytical perspective. The core thesis is that the Governess’ anxiety and bizarre actions stem from her compulsion to affirm herself in the eyes of the abstract and unrecognized “Other,” the objet petit a, the externalized and projected concept of the world beyond her physical self. The governess is argued to have imposed a personification of the Other onto her employer, also tellingly called the Master, and that her actions in the novel are driven by a deep, unconscious desire to prove herself to him. Meanwhile, her narrative is described as a “confession” in which she continues to try and gain the approval of the Other, but in this case as manifested by the reader of her letters (ultimately, the reader of the book), the original intended auditor of whom is never specified. Her increasing sense of distress is described as the result of the unattainability of the affirmation and unity she craves, as the more successful she is at her job, the less involved the Master needs to be with her, and yet being successful at her job is her only perceived means of gaining the approval of the Other.
Keyword Search for Greg W. Zacharias’s “The extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me”: Fantasy and Confession in *The Turn of the Screw*”

- Lacanian, psychoanalysis, objet petit a, *Turn of the Screw*, Henry James, repression, projection, externalization, unconscious, confession
9. Only about _ percent of people have mites. 10. Mites eat dead _ .

We were greatly impressed by what we heard. We found out that my new friend was probably the world's greatest living painter, that he had given up painting and was heard to say that he would never touch another brush as long as he lived. Betsy talked me into sending a note to his cabin, asking him around for a drink.

Well, we got to be real friendly. Above all, it must not be inferred that purposive action implies "rationality" of human action (that persons always use the objectively most adequate means for the attainment of their end). In fact, part of the present analysis is devoted to the determination of those elements which account for concrete deviations from rationality of action. Moreover, rationality and irrationality are not to be identified with the success and failure of action, respectively. For in a situation where the number of possible actions for attaining a given end is severely limited, one acts ration