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My Lai, Flies, and Beelzebub in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

The literary reputation of Tim O'Brien has steadily increased since his Vietnam novel *Going After Cacciato* won a National Book Award in 1978. In 1991, the year that O'Brien's short story collection *The Things They Carried* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Critics Award, one critic offered the following assessment: "Tim O'Brien is widely considered the best of a talented group of Vietnam veterans who have devoted much of their writing to their war experiences" (Naparsteck 1). O'Brien's fifth book, *In the Lake of the Woods*, a novel called "The Best Work of Fiction in 1994" by *Time* magazine and awarded the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for historical fiction in 1995, has further solidified his standing as America's finest writer of fiction on the Vietnam War.

In the Lake of the Woods returns to a subject O'Brien has treated in previous books: the haunting, often malignant, effect that combat in Vietnam has had on American infantrymen. While receiving nearly universal acclaim from reviewers and critics, *In The Lake of the Woods* has also been called "O'Brien's bleakest novel yet" (Kerrigan 20), an opinion based, in part, on the author's decision to use the My Lai massacre as one of the novel's central events. As Tobey C. Herzog, author of a book-length study of O'Brien's writing, has pointed out, American writers have avoided using the atrocity at My Lai in works of fiction (150). O'Brien, in breaking new ground for Vietnam fiction, not only fictionally dramatizes the notorious massacre, he also makes it the novel's moral lynchpin as he explores the corrosive effect of protagonist John Wade's unsuccessful attempt to repress the evil he witnessed at My Lai.

In various interviews O'Brien has justified his thematic use of the My

Lai incident. He has said that in writing this novel he was taking “a stab at trying to understand evil” (Mort 1991), and, in commenting on his decision to use the My Lai massacre specifically, O’Brien has told another interviewer, “If I was going to have an atrocity or have an act of real evil, the My Lai thing presents itself with such rich possibilities and such unresolved possibilities in the national psyche and in the human psyche” (Herzog 151). *In the Lake of the Woods*, which grapples with the mystery of evil, is O’Brien’s fictional treatment of those possibilities.

O’Brien’s sense of My Lai as a site resonating with evil goes back to his having served in a combat unit in the My Lai area one year after the infamous massacre, an experience he describes in his war autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973). The considerable research he did in writing *In the Lake of the Woods* reinforced his conviction that the My Lai incident was, in his words, a “grotesque, monstrous, obscene evil” (Herzog 153), but he has also expressed his outrage that his feelings about this shameful incident are no longer shared by many Americans, who, he fears, have grown indifferent to the moral lessons of the Vietnam War in general and My Lai in particular. “All this is history. Dead as those dead women and kids” (52), O’Brien has written in “The Vietnam in Me,” an essay in which he vents his disgust with America’s apparent desire to forget the evil of My Lai. Readers of *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, will not be allowed the comfort of such historical amnesia, for O’Brien’s horrifically graphic description of the butchery at My Lai is meant to re-prick America’s conscience about the Vietnam War’s most morally repugnant incident.

If, according to O’Brien, “The only way the horror of war can mean anything to us is through small detailed vignettes of episodes of evil” (Kaplan 102), then one of his most notable, albeit unsettling, achievements in *In the Lake of the Woods* is his ability to make the evil perpetrated at My Lai palpable and thus real for his reader. The following passage, told from the point of view of the novel’s protagonist John Wade (nicknamed “Sorcerer” by the men in his platoon), is representative of the visceral quality of O’Brien’s prose describing the carnage at My Lai:

Sorcerer watched a red tracer round burn through a child’s butt. He watched a woman’s head open up. . . . The bodies did twitching things. There were gases. There were splatterings and

bits of bone. . . . Kids were bawling. There were shit smells.
(214-215)

In this and other similarly harrowing passages, O'Brien brutally recreates the physical horrors of the massacre; however, in his evocation of evil at work during this atrocity, O'Brien does more than employ sickeningly graphic imagery. He also repeats an allusive motif reverberating with maleficent overtones: flies feasting on the corpses of the victims. The preponderance of such fly imagery in this novel is intended, in my opinion, to allude to a traditional symbol of evil—Beelzebub, the “Lord of Flies.”

The name “Beelzebub” can be traced back to the Old Testament. In *II Kings* 1:2-16 (King James Version), the god of the Philistine city of Ekron is given the name “Baal-zebub,” meaning “Lord of Flies” in Hebrew. In post-Biblical Hebrew, the name became transformed to “Beelzebul,” which can be construed as “Lord of Dung” (Gaster 374). This connotation, along with the name’s etymological association with flies, probably accounts for the fact that in certain Jewish religious texts the fly is considered an impure creature symbolic of corruption and evil. The Berakhot of the Talmud, for example, states, “The evil spirit lies like a fly at the door of the human heart” (Barton 299).

In the New Testament, Beelzebub is described as an actual devil. The Gospels of Mark (3:22) and Matthew (12:24) refer to him as “the prince of the devils,” thus establishing for future writers Beelzebub’s character as a demon in the service of Satan. Accordingly, Milton in *Paradise Lost* assigns Beelzebub a rank second only to Satan, while in Canto 34 of the *Inferno*, Dante makes him synonymous with Satan himself, referring to Lucifer as “Beelzebub” in one passage.

Beelzebub’s etymological origins as “Lord of Flies” has also been retained in Western literature and folklore. For example, in Part I of *Faust*, Goethe’s titular character addresses Mephistopheles as *Fliegengott* (Fly-God), and two 18th century magical handbooks, *Grimorium Verum* and *Grand Grimoire*, claim that Beelzebub, when summoned through black magic, will appear as a gigantic fly (Cavendish 211).

Perhaps the most notable example of a modern literary work using Beelzebub as a symbol of evil associated with flies is William Golding’s 1954 *Lord of the Flies*. In offering the severed head of a pig to the “Beast,” the novel’s schoolboys, Golding implies, are unwittingly externalizing the evil within themselves. The “Beast,” speaking through the fly-covered pig’s head, later identifies itself to one of the boys as the “Lord of

the Flies” and is thus to be identified with Beelzebub (171-72). However, the Lord of the Flies also makes clear that this “Beast” the boys fear as a source of evil actually lives within all of them, for, whether personified as the Devil or Satan or Beelzebub, the “Beast” is a metaphor for the ever-present potential for evil that lies within the human heart.

As an allusive evocation of Beelzebub at the My Lai massacre, Tim O’Brien’s use of fly imagery in *In the Lake of the Woods* recalls Golding’s symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*. Similarly, O’Brien is not implying the Devil’s actual presence at My Lai in a traditional religious sense, but in his conflation of fly imagery with allusions to Beelzebub, O’Brien has created a powerfully disturbing symbol of the human capacity for evil in war.

In addition to detailing those “vignettes of episodes of evil” that O’Brien says are a necessary ingredient in brutally honest war fiction, the novel’s narrative sections describing John Wade’s involvement in the My Lai massacre are permeated with references to flies, which, in suggesting the symbolic presence of Beelzebub, imbue these scenes with an intensified aura of evil. As his platoon prepares for its assault on My Lai on the morning of March 16, 1968, Wade’s vague sense of anxiety foreshadows his confrontation with evil during the massacre: “The air was wrong. The smells were wrong . . .” (104). Even the sunlight that morning, with its “rusty, metallic flavor” (105), adds to this foreboding feeling of “pure wrongness” (105). Wade’s intuitive sense of evil in the air is hellishly realized when the carnage begins at My Lai. Watching in horror as his fellow soldiers systematically slaughter the men, women, and children of the village, he thinks, “This was not madness. . . . This was sin” (107). Wade then becomes aware of “a low droning buzz that swelled up from somewhere deep inside the village” (108); it is the sound of flies, announcing the allusive appearance of Beelzebub as the “Lord of Flies.” Disoriented by the poisonous atmosphere of evil all around him, Wade shoots an old man whose hoe he mistakes for a rifle. All the while, flies continue to surround him.

Shortly afterwards, still traumatized by the relentless butchery he has witnessed, Wade finds himself “caught in the slime” (110) of dead bodies at the bottom of an irrigation ditch. The slime in which he finds himself immersed is literally the corpses’ effusion of blood and excrement, a possible evocation of Beelzebub as the “Lord of Dung.” Figuratively, of course, he has been plunged into the slime of moral depravity.

Then, in what he later thinks of as “an accident, the purest reflex”

(68), Wade shoots Weatherby, a member of his platoon, as he approaches him in the ditch. Whether this act was, to quote from Wade's thoughts at the start of the massacre, "madness" (hysterical reflex?) or "sin" (intentional evil?) is one of the many ambiguities of this novel; nevertheless, Wade clearly has been infected by the murderous evil that he will continue to associate with the flies at My Lai.

As his platoon leaves the hamlet that afternoon, for example, he "tried to push away the evil. It wasn't easy. The buzz had gone into his head. Flies, he thought. . ." (204). And that night Wade and Thinbill, another member of the platoon, sit in the darkness, "listening to the flies, the deep droning buzz all around them" (206), an aural reminder of the eruption of evil during the massacre.

The next morning their platoon is ordered to return to My Lai, and, upon entering the village, Wade sees that the wounds on the badly bloated corpses "bubbled with flies" (210). Lieutenant Rusty Calley scoops up a handful of flies and, holding them to his ear, says to his men, "You hear this? Fuckin' flies, they're claiming something criminal happened here" (210). Calley puts the flies up against Thinbill's ear, asking, "You hear any murder talk?" After Thinbill answers no, Calley does the same to Wade, who replies, "Deaf, sir." "The eyes," Calley says to Wade. "Notice any atrocities lately?" Wade answers, "Blind too" (211-12). Having badgered Thinbill and Wade into declaring that they have neither seen nor heard any evil, Calley is satisfied that they will speak of no evil to military authorities. The scene ends with Calley crushing the flies in his fist, but the flies of My Lai, demonized in their association with corpses, excrement, and Beelzebub, continue to haunt Wade, for he has internalized their buzzing and the evil they signify.

In his life back in the States after his return from Vietnam, Wade is unable to exorcise the ghosts of My Lai and, consequently, suffers from periodic bouts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. His PTSD occasionally surfaces in feelings of rage accompanied by an "electric sizzle" (5) in his blood and, significantly, a "furious buzzing noise" (51) in his head. The most prominent example of this combination of rage and "buzzing" occurs on the night of his wife's mysterious disappearance from the lakeside cabin in northern Minnesota, where the couple has retreated after Wade's landslide defeat in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate. In a surrealist episode of temporary insanity, Wade, humiliated by his election defeat, acts out his PTSD-induced fury by killing houseplants in the cabin. He later recalls hearing "a savage buzzing sound"

and repeating the phrase “Kill Jesus” (131) as he poured boiling water on the plants; it is as if Wade’s inner demon, the “Lord of the Flies,” had also assumed the role of the Antichrist on that night.

Did Wade then go on to kill his wife as he did the plants? The post-modernist, deliberately ambiguous nature of this novel does not allow a definitive answer to this question, for, as O’Brien’s author-narrator tells the reader in a footnote, “. . . if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book” (300). Nevertheless, the demonic buzz in Wade’s head during this night of uncontrollable rage suggests the distinct possibility that he did commit this act of evil.

References to flies are also prominent in the novel’s “Evidence” chapters, parts of which include quotations from American soldiers, both fictional and real-life, recalling the My Lai massacre. In all but one of the seven “Evidence” chapters, the fictional character Richard Thinbill recalls, in nine separate instances, the unsettling presence of flies at My Lai. Like Wade, Thinbill’s PTSD takes the form of nightmares: “All I remember now is flies. . . . I can’t stop dreaming about them” (135). One of his statements, “Flies everywhere. They glowed in the dark. It was like the spirit world . . .” (199), hints at another allusion to Beelzebub in its suggestion that these flies were the manifestation of spiritual evil. Commenting on the possibility that John Wade, having murdered his wife, then staged his own disappearance and is therefore still alive, Thinbill says in the novel’s last reference to flies, “No matter where he is, though, I bet he’s still got nightmares. I bet he’s out there swatting flies” (298). Thinbill believes that Wade will never be able to erase the haunting memory of the atrocity at My Lai, evil made palpable by the carrion-feasting flies.

In referring to America’s seeming desire to forget the My Lai atrocity, O’Brien has written, “Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it” (“The Vietnam in Me” 52). For the reader of *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, such erasure is impossible. In his use of flies as a symbol of murderous malevolence resonating with allusions to Beelzebub, Tim O’Brien has given us a harrowing reminder of the My Lai massacre in his attempt to restore a sense of evil to America’s evolving national mythology about the Vietnam War.

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