A POSTMODERN VIEW OF MORALITY IN THE WORKS
OF MORRISON, CAPOTE, AND O'BRIEN

A Thesis
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
Kelly Candelaria
Summer 2010
A POSTMODERN VIEW OF MORALITY IN THE WORKS
OF MORRISON, CAPOTE, AND O'BRIEN

A Thesis

by

Kelly Candelaria

Summer 2010

APPROVED BY THE DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES
AND VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH:

Katie Milo, Ed.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Robert G. Davidson, Ph.D.
Graduate Coordinator

Robert G. Davidson, Ph.D., Chair

Geoffrey Baker, Ph.D.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my nephews Garett, Ryan, and Cole Greenwald. Your Aunt KK thinks you are absolutely fabulous, and hopes that you will be inspired by my project to believe that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been with me for over two years, and it may be hard to let go. I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement. First of all, my parents, Mel and Kristine Candelaria who encouraged me to go back to school. I should have listened to you the first time, Mom! Also I’d like to thank Melinda and Sean Greenwald. You both have always encouraged me to go for my dreams. Garett, Ryan, and Cole you know I love you and I dedicated this project to you, so what else can I say?

I’d also like to thank Dr. Rob Davidson who spent countless hours with me on this project. There are not words to express my gratitude. Your belief in this idea is what nourished all the work I have done. I have grown as a scholar, and writer through this process and your continual support and guidance has changed me as a person. Thank you! Also, Dr. Geoff Baker who always pushed me to be a better writer and think through what I was trying to say. I also would like to thank the Chico State English Department Faculty especially Dr. Lynn Houston, Dr. Kim Jaxon, and Dr. Aiping Zhang. You all have inspired me to accomplish dreams that for years felt out of my reach.

To the wonderful people at Chico State who have helped me along the way such as: Dr. Sue Pate, Gail Holbrook, Mike Mazur, and Dr. Bill Johnson in the Theatre Department; Lorraine Smith in advising. You have been instrumental in my success. I would also like to thank my friends who have laughed, cried with me, and watched me lose my mind multiple times. You know who you are but here we go: Jake Boone, Chris
Cullen, Jen White, Kathie Thompson, Sarah Knowlton, Will Lombardi, Corey Gruber, Lisa Trombley and Sharon DeMeyer.

If I have forgotten anyone, please forgive me. My heart is full with thanks but my mind might be bereft of words, at this point!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Moral Argument</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism and Literary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the Postmodern Novel?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Moral Inquiry</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Three Novels</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Beloved: Toni Morrison</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Moral Obligation: The Restoration of a Murdered Narrative</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. In Cold Blood: Truman Capote</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Moral Awareness: All Men Might be Created Equal but are they Treated Equal?</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. In the Lake of the Woods: Tim O’Brien</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Moral Responsibility: A Global Moral Awareness</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

A POSTMODERN VIEW OF MORALITY IN THE WORKS
OF MORRISON, CAPOTE, AND O’BRIEN

by

Kelly Candelaria

Master of Arts in English

California State University, Chico

Summer 2010

Postmodern literature is not the first place that we think to look in order to engage in conversations regarding morality. In fact, most contemporary readers and writers would argue that there has been a chasm built between today’s narratives and our moral concerns.

Although there might not be one universal moral truth that postmodern writers are attempting to address in their narratives, the narratives are extremely adept at providing launching points to instigate conversations that center around themes of morality. I shall examine *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, which deals with slavery in America and was inspired by the life of Peggy Margaret Garner, an American Slave; *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, which investigates the murders of Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas; and *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O’Brien, which considers the effects of the Vietnam War. We shall see that the stakes are high. Freedoms come with a price and
sometimes the machine of our society needs to be put under a magnifying glass in order to right injustices and inequalities in our world. The natural tendency of the postmodern condition to break away from established mores of the culture and its lack of trust for grand narratives within the society provides a fertile and rich environment for moral questions and concerns regarding our culture to be considered in depth.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A Moral Argument

Let me say for the moment that morality means nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted.

—John Gardner, On Moral Fiction

Art and literature are linked to discussions of politics, ethics, and morality in culture and have been for centuries. Daniel Bell defines culture as “the realm of ideas, of philosophical and religious meanings, especially those that go beyond the mundane world: and of expressiveness in the arts [and] is the source of creativity [that] engages the most fertile...thinkers and artists of the age” (207). The relationship between postmodernism and culture has always been complex. A cornerstone of the postmodern tenet is that it has undermined formally stable moral codes and bodies of knowledge. This muddled life experience, and the breaking away of a structure and reliable belief system, has lead to a questioning of the quest for meaning in life in postmodern literature. Writers, through the postmodern novel, have experimented in their writings with this idea of a chaotic and unreliable world, and while doing this have found an interesting vehicle to provide commentary on our social and cultural environment. As the grand narratives or
meta-narratives\(^1\) lost their authority the postmodern novel became a valuable medium to present viewpoints that previously had been rejected or ignored in society.

When trying to locate the idea of morality within the genre, we can see that the postmodern novel has typically broken away from traditional moral suppositions regarding our society and culture, in fact radically so. In “Ethics and Evil” author Daniel Bell writes “[the] central tenet [of postmodernism] is that there are no timeless moral truths, nor even something called ‘truth’ itself” (207). Although postmodernism may rest upon the idea that there are not any irrefutable truths, writers and theorists have still vehemently debated the ethical and moral responsibility of literature. These debates are partially incited by our deep-seated belief in the influence of literature on our society. The postmodern text is actually extremely useful when considering morality within our culture due to its very nature of breaking away from tradition because it offers new perspectives on cultural values and morals. A new reading of the postmodern novel, with a consideration of morality, reveals these novels have created a unique space where societal concerns and moral questions can be contemplated and explored in a non-linear, multifaceted fashion that enables the reader to see multiple viewpoints.

Postmodernism and Literary Theory

The postmodern novel opens new perspectives on relevant social and cultural issues in numerous ways. First, consider the nature of the adjusted relationship between the author and the audience, and the move from authorial authority to a reader-centered response of a text. In the article, “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault argues that the

\(^1\) The idea of the meta-narrative, or grand narrative, is an idea that Jean-François Lyotard works with in depth in *The Postmodern Condition*. 
conventional premises of our concepts of what an author is, and where the meaning comes from in texts has radically shifted. Foucault breaks down the traditional power of the author and cedes the authority to the reader through the evaluation of the text on the page. Academic scholar Timothy Bewes writes that meaning from a text is derived from “a meditation which engages the reader philosophically, in which the author and reader are embarked upon a joint enterprise” (428). This joint enterprise is negotiated within the pages of the text and contextualizes its meaning. If we re-contextualize the narrative and move away from a singular meaning crafted by the author, then we can look at it as a dynamic force moving, reflecting, and changing our culture.

Foucault considers these concepts of deriving meaning within the text in depth when he looks at the relationship between the text and the author. He is in alignment with such theorists as Roland Barthes and Wolfgang Iser who argue that the authority of the narrative does not reside with the author. In Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” we find the birth of the reader and Reader Response Theory. Moving the location of meaning to the reader opens up interesting and thought-provoking avenues of discussion when deciding what a text is about, especially in the case of the postmodern novel, due to the complexity of a narrative that is frequently written in a non-linear fashion. When the reader is given the power to decide the meaning of the text, a new voice emerges from its pages and it allows the postmodern authors to write in a less didactic way. The ‘anti-form’ or, perhaps

2 It might be remiss not to note here that the postmodern novelist in many cases may be aware, and even using to their advantage, the knowledge that the reader will be filling in gaps and making connections within the text to current day events. Other postmodern novelists are known to leave the reader with ambiguous endings in order for the reader to fully experience the uncertainty of the postmodern existence. I will contemplate this in further depth when considering the novels *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote and *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O’Brien in forthcoming chapters.
more accurately, the experimentation with form in the postmodern novel, combined with the power of the response to the text on the reader, and the use of defamiliarization\textsuperscript{3} or exchanging familiar ideas with strange ones or vice-versa, become ways for postmodernists to play with moral relativism. Since the postmodern novel isn’t held to conventional choices of form, and melds many forms together in order to create new meanings, these texts provide new spaces in which the reader must work to establish meaning instead of relying on familiar cultural myths to fill in the gaps for meaning. By doing this, the works stage a meeting ground for different moral and cultural opinions and beliefs to be considered.

This shift in the theoretical focus and move away from the power of the author helps to re-adjust the center of attention and gives room for new structures embedded in the postmodern narrative. This fragmentation furnishes the author with a freedom to play with complex ideas. With this move, it becomes apparent that in order for the reader to be birthed, the traditional concept of the author has to die. Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” in \textit{Image, Music, Text}, belongs to the Post-Structuralist and Deconstructionist Theorists and is an important precursor to world of Reader Response Theorists that followed. Wolfgang Iser is also key in this work with his article “The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach,” from his 1968 book \textit{The Implied Reader}. The writings of these two theorists are connected in the fact that literary criticism shifted its attention from the author-centered views regarding the text to the text itself, and then to the response of the reader to the text. The deconstruction of the static

\textsuperscript{3} Defamiliarization is a term first used by Viktor Shklovsky in “Art as Technique” in 1917.
dictatorship of the author gave way to the growing new reign of the reader.\textsuperscript{4} Taken a step further, in postmodern literature, the reader is given a narrative that entices him or her into complex issues that have multiple meanings and conclusions based upon cultural and societal issues that had previously been considered an inappropriate or insignificant.

Roland Barthes contends that prior theory taught that “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end…the voice of a single person, the \textit{author} ‘confiding’ in us”\textsuperscript{(143)}. This type of textual analysis only allows for the meaning of the text to be considered from the viewpoint of the author. This makes the text far more limited in nature. With this type of analysis, meaning is derived from what the author believes or thinks. Barthes pulls apart this theory and dissembles the “powerful sway” of the “Author.” He allows the text to become a breathing, living, and changing entity somehow beyond and bigger than the author. Meaning, he argues, is located elsewhere: “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (146). Barthes argues that there is not one viewpoint that causes the locus of meaning. With this concept coming into the world of the text, we can see how the work of the text is dynamic and growing rather than static and requiring deciphering, and that it is intricately interwoven with the culture. Barthes then allows for the text to become a far more complex entity when he writes that “once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (147). Moving beyond a single center of meaning, a single authority, Barthes posits something more

\textsuperscript{4} Before Reader Response Theory, The Modernist Movement set the precedent by being the first to recognize the possible “outdated” nature of the political, religious, and social systems. This gives a place for the Postmodernism and Reader Response Theory. Modernism allowed for a shifting of established authority.
dynamic and allows a “total existence of writing: [which means that] a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations” (148). In other words, the sources of locations of meaning are multiple, various, and fluid. When we take this new power and position, the narratives can be used to gain insight into our culture and the moral concerns that we face.

As the postmodern narrative moves out of a mono-dimensional state and into a flexible area that can adjust to a globalized viewpoint, theory invites new perspectives and interpretive angles into perspective. Barthes, as it were, incites the death of the author and the reader is created: Wolfgang Iser will become the caretaker for the newly born infant. He begins the growth and globalization of the narrative stating in “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” that “a literary work…must take into account not only the actual text but also…the actions involved in responding to the text” (274). As a culture, as we have moved out of a singular viewpoint and one-world existence into the awareness of a global responsibility, our narratives have also grown into a larger voice and awareness and they begin to invite a multitude of voices within the text. Wolfgang Iser clarifies for us that the “work of the text” cannot only be the text and the realization of the text but that this work “must lie somewhere between the two” (274). The work is formed as a somewhat “virtual” reality between the text and the reader. This virtual reality where meaning is created becomes a place of play where meanings can shift and morph continuously.

The postmodern novel’s exciting role in this theoretical lens is that it allows for a complexity that is enhanced by the premise that the meaning of a text is not static, but dynamic: it changes upon multiple readings. The text is not alive only through the
intentions of the author, and the meaning doesn’t only reside in the moment of the first reading. The narratives, especially those of the postmodern novel because of their multi-layered, complex forms and subject matter, live, change, and respond according to the circumstances around it. The reader has even more agency within the pages of the postmodern novel to change perspectives due to the multitude of elements and styles within its pages. The postmodern novel’s inability to be nailed down into one approach makes possible for the reader to have new and fresh insights upon numerous engagements with the text.

Wolfgang Iser considers the reader and the first reading of the text important but also delves into the world of the second reading. To Iser, this second reading contains as much validity as the first. He notes that on a second reading the reader may have “notice[d] things he had missed…but that this is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that the second time he is looking at the text from a different perspective” (281). This multiple perspective allows for multiple meanings and versions of the narrative. Iser writes that, “the second reading is [not] ‘truer’ than the first—they are quite simply, different” (281). The reader’s response has been given even greater significance in allowing there to be room in the work of the text for the growth and change of the reader. This is important when considering morality, culture, and society because these are non-fixed, fluctuating, and variable concepts. Our concepts of morality and culture are continually changing. This gives the reader the ability to read the postmodern novel and find a multiplicity of meanings to its narrative.

When looking at the theories of Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, and Reader Response Theory, we can see that moving the location of meaning away from the
author (outside the text) to the reader (inside the text) allows the reader to become the creator of the meaning of the text. The postmodern novel’s form lends itself to be changed, shifted, increased, decreased, and fluctuated throughout the entire life of the text. In essence the death of the author births a multitude of possibilities for the reader, allowing the novel to become chameleon-like in its capacities and possibilities, and this enables the narratives to be endless and timeless in scope. To reiterate, the move to a reader-centered alignment gives the power to reader to understand and contemplate the meaning of the text in an extremely complex way in conjunction with the fluctuations and nuances the society is facing at the time. Because the novel will in essence affect the reader, it has the power to change people’s perspectives, and therefore the society that the reader belongs to.

What is the Postmodern Novel?

Since our narratives are indeed entrenched in power, and they speak through the reader to our culture regarding moral issues that we are facing, it is important to understand how the postmodern novel is able to do this in such a consistent and interesting way. The postmodern novel, with its non-linear, multi-layered form, is perhaps the ideal vehicle for an examination of contrasting and clashing issues, and problems faced by society. In today’s culture, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the legitimate and the illegitimate, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the sane and the insane, the moral and the immoral, the hero and the villain.5 With

---

5 The idea of distinguishing between good and the bad will be an important concept to remember when I consider Truman Capote’s novel, In Cold Blood and Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved. Both novels
the reader’s ability to make connections and fill in gaps of information, the text becomes a way for the reader to contemplate complex social issues. The form of the postmodern novel is extremely important in understanding why the reader is so pivotal in locating the questions of morality within the text.

Although there might not be one universal moral truth that postmodern writers are attempting to address in their narratives, the narratives are extremely adept at providing launching points to instigate conversations that center around themes of morality. In fact, it is extremely interesting to look closely at the postmodern texts in both their form and content to discover how they are intricately tied to morality within our culture. As Jean-François Lyotard explains in “Defining the Postmodern” a trait that defines the postmodern experience is “a sort of *bricolage*” (6). This implies that the postmodern text is a creation of a work that includes various forms of materials or narratives.

Jean-François Lyotard goes on to write that postmodern movement becomes “something like a conversion, a new direction after the previous one” (Lyonard 1986, 7). The postmodern novel does not completely reject the modernist form; it more accurately rejects its perspective. Instead of rejecting the form it uses and converts it, presenting to the reader new social and cultural perspectives that are emerging. As we examine postmodern literature’s cagey disposition, one that begs for variant forms of narrative that can include poetry, journalism, and realism,⁶ we find that these narratives aptly provide require the reader to reconsider conventional concepts of good and bad behavior based upon the circumstances and prejudices in society.

⁶ The melding of many forms of narratives will be considered in great detail during upcoming chapters.
places where readers can respond and meditate on cultural and societal dilemmas that have been previously limited or controlling in nature. The authors’ ability to investigate these new cultural and societal perspectives allows the reader to consider these events within a different moral context than they had previously been able to reflect on. The author of the postmodern narrative layers these stories side by side like a mason building a wall (*bricolage*), and a new story is built. These stories are interpreted by the reader who understands the conventions of the previous movement and begins to assimilate the new information with the old, thereby creating new meaning from the texts.

Although the Lyotardian concept of *bricolage* is an important launching ground for the idea of building new structures from previous structures, Frederic Jameson’s idea of *pastiche* is more appropriate in my consideration of morality in the postmodern novel. Another way that reader is encouraged to think about difficult moral questions regarding society and culture is through the postmodern novel’s use of presenting multiple viewpoints to the reader. For example, the reader is given the opportunity to view the ugly subject matter of murder from multiple perspectives, and with this new view they are able to see information in a more heightened, adjusted, and accurate way. What the postmodern novel’s form facilitates with greater ability than other genres, such as realism, or the modernist movement, is found in some of the distinct qualities within its pages, such as previously considered *bricolage*. Another distinct quality is that of *pastiche*. *Pastiche* is similar to the concept of *bricolage* in that it is a putting or cobbling together a multitude of different elements and allows for a wide and

---

7 Even new genres are built out of this use of *bricolage* such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*.
8 An example of this is in Toni Morrison’s, *Beloved* discussed in chapter two.
varied response to the narrative. Although similar in concept, pastiche also speaks regarding the tone in conjunction with the use of the converted form.

_Pastiche is a term that Fredric Jameson⁹ has developed and considers “one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today” (The Cultural Turn 4). In order to understand the concept of pastiche in a clearer way in this context we can look at Jameson’s definition from his book Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style…without any of parody’s ulterior motives” (17). What is interesting to note about Jameson’s definition of pastiche is that he is interested in clarifying that the imitation or use of the genres by authors is not mocking in nature. The authors’ use of pastiche in the postmodern novel’s narrative is not intended to be seen as disrespectful but rather to provide a vehicle that can employ these recognized genres and at the same time incorporate viewpoints or positions that had previously been considered too ugly to be placed in our history.¹⁰

The juxtaposition of the different narratives next to one another highlights the differences between the stories that we recognize from previous experiences and gives the reader an opportunity to experience them in a new, more complex way. The idea of pastiche clearly has been defined by its lack of rancor or intentional ridicule of what it mimics. This places the postmodern novel with a rather heightened sense of responsibility. If the postmodernist authors’ intention is not to mock, then the stage is set

---

⁹ Jameson, in his book Postmodernism, credits the creation of the term to Thomas Mann in Doktor Faustus and Theodor Adorno.

¹⁰ This will be extremely important to remember when considering Toni Morrison’s Beloved, which presents to the reader a lost or silenced history.
for a serious and compelling analysis by the reader. Underlying the mimicry of the form by the author is a clear understanding of the value of the copied genre. The reader is then asked in turn draw connections between the two and at the same time consider possible differences in meaning between the two similar structures.

Another trait of postmodernism is that it is continually concerned with the inner workings of society and are “specific reactions against the established forms…” of art (Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* 1). In this context, it would be easy to relegate the power of postmodernism and consider it only as a form of anti-establishment. If that were the misunderstood conclusion, it would be logical to insist that postmodernism would not have any interest in speaking to moral concerns of the culture. However, postmodernism is not an abolition of the form; it is a reaction against “the established form” as the only consideration of an artistic form. Society today has also moved passed this singular viewpoint. Jameson’s writing seems to point to the power of societal logic when he concludes his writing in “Postmodernism and the Consumerist Society” found in his book the *Cultural Turn* that he believes that postmodernism “in many ways express[es] the deeper logic of [the]…social system” (7). Again, postmodernism recognizes the social system and is a reaction against it. *Pastiche* becomes a way that an author can place the multiple values and viewpoints that the culture has, within the postmodern novel’s text. Due to the postmodern world’s continually shifting and changing perspective the postmodern novelist can incorporate that fluidity into the novel by using the knowledge that the reader will bring with them not only their own cultural values but the values that have been previously regarded and replaced within the society. Jameson writes that the “social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past [and] had
begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions…[and] all earlier social information”(The Cultural Turn 20). This “perpetual change that obliterates traditions” becomes the perfect place for a new moral perspective to be considered. The postmodern condition breaks down the nostalgia, or desire for the past, in order to present new possibilities. The postmodern novel’s refusal to live in past cultural narratives forces the reader to form new perspectives regarding their culture and society, making it the perfect vehicle for a new moral perspective to emerge from its pages.

The postmodern novel draws attention to the use of factual material by the author in order to blur the lines between story (or narrative). This blurring between fact and fiction is a way for the writer to play with the material through the elements of pastiche, fragmentation, and non-linear narratives. These movements away from linear and concrete knowledge gives the reader the power to contemplate history as a record of events not without bias but riddled with rhetoric embedded into our society to cultivate and protect myths perpetuated by the voice of the preferred majority. This move of embedding fact in fiction changes our perception of history and allows for histories that have been silenced to be reinstated into our culture.

Another way that the postmodern novel becomes a strong and flexible tool for a moral reading is its rejection or blurring of prescribed high and low art forms. The postmodern novel is willing to tackle any genre and any subject. This gives the postmodern novel a fluidity that prior artistic forms were not allowed. All of the books that I will focus into and look at for a moral reading contain an actual historical event,
some of which could be construed as sensationalistic in nature.\footnote{This can be seen in Truman Capote’s \textit{In Cold Blood}.} Although arguments have been made regarding what can be considered as art in our culture, the postmodern author unabashedly looks into popular culture for its inspiration.

\textbf{Introduction: The Moral Inquiry}

In the consideration of a moral inquiry in the postmodern novel, it is found that the genre is extremely adept at providing cultural and societal insight due to its ability to present multiple viewpoints allowing for a moral relativism to be lent to the text. This works in conjunction with Reader Response Theory that allows the reader to consider morality when presented with multiple viewpoints. Although critics may have been contemplating “what is art” for centuries, today’s readers resist preaching or sermons, and are not concerned as much with what critics consider to be art. Culturally savvy Twenty-First Century readers find archaic the idea that art has a clear, didactic moral focus as opposed to simply staging a narrative that demands a moral response, without being prescriptive. John Gardner, in \textit{On Moral Fiction}, disagrees. He argues that it is the artist’s responsibility to create moral art. In fact, \textit{it is} only art if it is moral. He claims, “art is essentially and primarily moral…in what it says” (15). Gardner’s ideas are important to the argument of a moral reading of the postmodern novel because if the postmodern novel is left void of a possible moral perspective it would become a rather useless exercise in complexity. It would seem rather peculiar that the author of the postmodern novel has crafted multiple layers within the text for the sole purpose of his reading pleasure. If a writer is only writing for himself then the idea that his work will
affect other people seems mute. Literature does have an effect on its reader. It seems clear that if a story or narrative has changed a person, it has significant moral value.

According to Wayne C. Booth, author of *In the Company we Keep*, professional critics or scholars may respond that “fictions don’t change people’s lives,” but when he asked people to “name fictions that changed your character—or made you want to change your conduct,” the answers were “quick” and “ranged all over the moral landscape” (278). Since most people will respond that a narrative has changed them, we can assert that readers still use texts as sites to stage moral inquiry.

Literature has the power to influence our lives. It is a force, that combined with our agency and free will, opens up ideas that have previously been held at bay by power structures in our society that limit cultural freedom. It seems quite obvious that didactic rhetorical approaches that preach morality do not interest, satisfy or change today’s readers, including myself. This is why the postmodern novel has the ability to speak to its readers in ways that linear, introverted narratives have been unable to do in the past. It greatly concerns me when as artists, writers, performers, readers and critics we negate that there is moral value with today’s writing, theater and art, or that we disregard the opinion that our work does affect people.

Since there is power contained within our narratives, it is normal that there would be concern over the misuse of this power. This is another reason we are apprehensive to think of our literature and art’s ability to instruct. This skepticism is actually the byproduct of moral relativism and due to a postmodern age that has tried to move away from a singular voice of authority. The issue of respecting personal perspective and cultural diversity is important to reiterate; we should not be required to
conform to anyone else’s moral beliefs. Wayne C. Booth eloquently clarifies this point when he states, “the long history of abuse of our social nature by churches and states, the obvious stultifications that result when individuals are forced to conform...can seem to suggest that we have only two possible paths for the self” (*In the Company we Keep* 240). This is the path that institutions, governments and authorities want us to take and the path that the private individual traverses. When arguing for a moral reading within the pages of the postmodern novel it is important to remember that the intent of a moral reading is not to produce a didactic work that forces the reader to a pre-established conclusion. Timothy Bewes notes that this would involve a “manipulation of the audience or readership” (422). A moral reading should rather be contemplated as a “‘legitimate’ exploration of philosophical questions” (Bewes 421). The atrocities that have been committed under the guise of a universal morality will forever cry out for redemption. Literature should not control what people think or be created with that purpose in mind. Rather it should be a place where readers may change the way they think and act after they read.

By looking at postmodern texts, we can see that postmodernism did not reject the idea of morality within the pages of our literature, but actually presents it in a far more complex and non-linear fashion. This non-linear fashion brings up moral concerns and is exactly what I argue makes postmodern literature so powerful. One way we can look at these narratives is by looking at the questions Daniel Bell brings up in his writing, “Ethics and Evil: Frameworks for Twenty-First-Century Culture.” Bell asks us to consider that: “…Contending forces raise…the moral questions of Ethics and Evil” (212). He brings up some extremely important questions when he asks his readers, “Are these
only matters of the moment, or are these timeless questions? What judgments do we make about them? What obligations do ‘we’…have in these situations? How do we establish right and wrong—factually and morally…?” (Bell 212). I would argue that these questions may be too big to answer entirely, and may not require an answer at all. If an answer is not what we seek, if we move away from the binary of right and wrong we move into a place where more voices, more freedom, and more options are available to enable our society to grow and thrive, what do we accomplish? In my view, we create a space where we can contemplate freedom and how it seems that in order for one group to have it, another must be enslaved by it. In bringing up these moral concerns, I still find that the arts, literature and drama seem to be the place where the most fascinating and thought-provoking forums for these questions are presented. Freedoms come with a price and sometimes the machine of our society needs to be put under a magnifying glass in order to right injustices and inequalities in our world. The postmodern novel gives us the ‘freedom’ to be the ‘other’ and allows us to formulate new modes of thinking in order to heal, change, and unify our world.

The naysayers of this project continually tell me at conferences, in emails, and in discussions that I cannot bring an ethical or moral lens to the postmodern novel. As one conference mate told me, “You can’t do that!” The question isn’t really if we can or can’t do it, rather it lies in the idea of how do we do it and what does it imply? It seems as if I am in good company with Wayne C. Booth in chapter two of In the Company we Keep when he writes, “it [ethical criticism] plays at best a minor and often deplored role on the scene of theory” (25). Why is it that we cannot look at questions of morality that are surrounding our culture? If we use such binary coding and wording as don’t, or can’t,
haven’t we limited the possibilities or interpretations of some of the major works of our time? In fact, as scholars this is what we are trained to do: to look deeply into the text of a narrative and consider its contribution as a literary work. As John Gardner states in *On Moral Fiction*, “I hope to explain why moral art and criticism are necessary and, in a democracy, essential” (19). It is essential in a democracy because it helps us to contextualize our freedoms since most personal freedoms can infringe upon the freedoms of others. And it is imperative that we look to make sure that the ‘others’ are not marginalized groups that have limited voice in our society.

In the pages of our literature we can clearly see that at all times someone, somewhere has been the ‘other.’ In addition, in many instances the ‘other’ is ourselves: our own reflection in the mirror. As Gardner notes, is there a reason why we have to “explain why sophisticated modern free society tends to be embarrassed by the whole idea of morality and by all its antique, Platonic- or scholastic-sounding manifestations?” (19) We might actually have to ask, as Wayne C. Booth has, if we really have thrown ethical criticism away or if we have just “disguise[d] it, in effect under other labels: ‘Political’, ‘Social’, or ‘Cultural’ criticism; ‘Psychological’ or ‘Psychoanalytical’ criticism and a myriad of other ‘criticisms’ that we have come up with (25). Again, our history regarding ethical and moral questions is rich. Booth reminds us that “until the late nineteenth century almost everyone took for granted that a major task of any critic is to appraise the ethical value of works of art” (25). In actuality, it seems only right that it should be the narratives that are being produced in our culture that speak to our moral and

---

12 The ‘other’ is a term that is developed by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. Although not used in the same context here Said’s ideas are relevant in considering that the other represents a marginalized group.
ethical concerns. If we have dropped the notion that morality can be dictated to us by some outside religious force,\textsuperscript{13} doesn’t it make sense that it would be the thinkers of our age who would point us to the foibles of our generation? It would be impossible to contemplate the advent of such thriving literary theoretical lenses as New Historicism and Reader Response Theory in the Twenty-First Century without the precursors of Biographical and Psychoanalytical lenses. Our understanding of culture, society, and the narratives that guide and are interwoven in them, are seemingly built upon the prior movements that have contextualized our meaning of them.

Introduction: The Three Novels

It would seem remiss not to mention how art throughout time has been a reflection of what culture is morally conflicted by and concerned with. Literary critics have considered what is art, and what is not art, and morality and art seem to be intrinsically woven together. Postmodern literature is able discuss these divergent issues because it addresses subject matter that had previously been considered unworthy or distasteful.\textsuperscript{14} This conflict between what we consider art is, is magnified by the relationship between beauty and morality and if only stories of beauty and good moral characters can speak to us about moral and ethical concerns.\textsuperscript{15}

To have a healthy discussion of morality, it will be impossible to exclude the ugly. This is because both beautiful and ugly stories affect and change us. It seems

\textsuperscript{13} A meta-narrative as Lyotard has suggested in \textit{The Postmodern Condition}.

\textsuperscript{14} This again relates to the idea of the blurring high and low art forms, and is a tenet of postmodern literature.

\textsuperscript{15} The relationship between art, beauty, and morality has been clearly and eloquently mapped by Elaine Scarry in her work \textit{On Beauty and Being Just}. 
relevant to bring this to attention due to the subject matter of the postmodern novels that I will consider in the next few chapters. All of which deal with the theme of murder in our society in order to address some of the moral conflicts that we are facing in our culture. Even though murder may be an ugly theme, it is extremely useful in positing intense situations for the reader to grapple with. And although some critics such as John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction* may argue that postmodern books are not an exercise in “beauty,” they do “break down barriers of prejudice and ignorance, and hold up ideals worth pursuing” (42). These barriers that are broken allow for a new perspective on the issues we are facing as a society. The postmodern novel is an extremely effective tool in creating moral fiction. It allows the transcendence of the barriers of traditionally accepted art so that the reader can judge morality from more than just beauty and virtue, as the only established position of authority. In this context, I am not using the term moral as one prescribed way to view another’s actions. Instead, I would say that postmodern books are moral in that they ask the reader to consider these questions.

Although we live in a chaotic world that has no fixed meaning, our literature and art in the postmodern era are still places where we can consider our moral and ethical response and responsibility. The theme of murder may be ugly and perhaps offensive but it can illuminate differences and biases that we are maintaining as a society that need to be altered. The repulsiveness of murder becomes a backdrop for the author and the reader to explore complex areas in our society. David Richter says it clearly when he writes, “There will inevitably be many different versions of human life or a historical event, all of them providing different versions of the truth” (142). This is such an important consideration to the postmodernist and to our society today. It is time in to look and listen
to viewpoints that have been silenced and perhaps altered in order to maintain meta-narratives within our society that are dangerous and destructive. In these treatments of murder, the postmodern novel is rich in its ability to present and allow for a conversation which encompasses the frame of moral relativism. These narrative forms allow for the dissolution of the ‘other’ in the way that it begs all of us to see ourselves as the other, disenfranchised, and mute. We contemplate moral dilemmas not only from our cultural reference but also from the perspective of different peoples and cultures, which will truly make us a global culture.

Postmodernism in all of its quirky form and variant narrative gives play for the authors to present questions to the reader regarding the motives and choices of our culture. The postmodern novels that I will be using as examples are studies of morality and can be looked at in two ways: by the content, and by the form. There are a multitude of postmodern novels that are examples of the genre’s ability to addresses difficult moral questions. The novels that I am considering all have the common theme of murder to magnify the complexity of moral concerns in our society and are based on an actual historical event. The ugliness of murder becomes a backdrop for the author and the reader to explore complex areas in our society. The common thread of historical relevance allows the author to bring up real events that the reader can consider. And the event that happened, or not as you will, is murder. Looking at murder, we will consider responsibility for it through the eyes of the enslaved, underprivileged, abused, marginalized and disenfranchised. Whether the author intended it to or not, these books ask us to look at real life events and consider a moral response to them.
I shall examine *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, which deals with slavery in America and was inspired by the life of Peggy Margaret Garner, an American Slave; *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, which investigates the murders of Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas; and *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O’Brien, which considers the effects of the Vietnam War. We shall see that the stakes are high. Freedoms come with a price and sometimes the machine of our society needs to be put under a magnifying glass in order to right injustices and inequalities in our world. The natural tendency of the postmodern condition to break away from established mores of the culture and its lack of trust for grand narratives within the society provides a fertile and rich environment for moral questions and concerns regarding our culture to be considered in depth.
CHAPTER II

BELOVED: TONI MORRISON

A Moral Obligation: The Restoration of a Murdered Narrative

Beloved is a work that is not easily cornered into a single perspective. Criticism abounds around Morrison’s work most assuredly due the fact that it can speak in so many ways regarding our society. This novel has the ability to adjust itself to so many purposes and perspectives. By looking at Beloved as a postmodern text and analyzing how the novel stages a moral and ethical consideration within our culture, indeed a new thrust is generated that can instigate conversations regarding the complexity of the new global life that we are a part of, and bring enlightenment about the postmodern condition. Toni Morrison’s Beloved, by means of its historical reference and relevance, use of pastiche through the melding of genres, and its ability to look at moral questions through multiple viewpoints, demands the reader to respond to the narrative on a multitude of complex levels. The postmodern text through its form and the use of the narrative modes, historical relevance and reference, and elements of poetry in it, requires a moral response from the reader.

The postmodern text and the traditional concepts of morality seem to be already circling each other in preparation for debate. Postmodern theory balks against the grand narratives that used to frequent the pages of our literature. Their demise, as
suggested by theorists, has been their inadequacy to speak to society due to their limited viewpoint and the new global perspective that we have. Inclusion of Beloved as a postmodern text has induced some excitement and dismay. Postmodernism has sanctioned the dismemberment and destruction of the meta-narrative. This restriction of Beloved from a postmodern reading seems troublesome and refuses to adhere due to the very traits that are imbedded into the definition of the postmodern novel.¹

In turning our attention to Morrison’s work, Beloved, we can see that moral questions regarding our silenced history due to slavery through the theme of murder can be viewed to bring a multi-layered, poly-vocal space which enables a reconstruction to our society. Beloved’s historical background becomes an extremely important reason why the text should be considered in a moral inquiry. In our first example of how the text requires the reader to investigate a moral response, we see that Morrison uses the few facts known about the history of the African-American experience during slavery, and the genre of fiction to bring up a different type of discussion of freedom. Morrison writes a lost or recovered history of Reconstruction-era black America; Morrison will use the vehicle of a fiction novel to present facts or truths of the actual events of slavery that have been silenced. In Beloved the mixing of these two genres allows this postmodern novel to dig into our history and find narratives that have been lost and bring them back to the life in order to provoke the reader to look at the strength and health of our society today. Beloved’s narrative is intrinsically connected to the corrupt world of slavery and how to protect children from its pain and destruction.

¹ As defined in the introduction a trait of the postmodern novel is pastiche.
Although the facts of Reconstruction-era black America are few, *Beloved* is a story that Morrison wrote, inspired by a newspaper clipping she discovers. In fact, Morrison calls it a “literary archeology” in her introduction to *Beloved*. The clipping, read by Morrison, tells the story of “Margaret [Peggy] Garner, a young mother who, having escaped from slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). This piece of history that Morrison delves into is a launching point for her to reconstruct a voice of slavery that has been silenced and kept from the world. She continues on to write that Garner became a sort of “célèbre in the fight against Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners [and] that her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of the Abolitionists as well as newspapers” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). Morrison recognizes and draws attention to the intense power and effects of Peggy Garner’s actions and uses them to draw us into a historical conversation that centers on moral choices and responsibilities that the reader will then have to consider in a different way.

In effect, Morrison composes, with complexity, a history of slavery and of a mother who murders her child, in order to provide a poly-vocal space to speak to its savage world. She notes that Garner had “the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). Morrison is aware that in order to have a discussion of ‘freedom’ in America we will need to be ferocious in our pursuit of truth. The complexity of the idea of freedom developed through the form of the postmodern text will allow for multiple versions of ‘truth’ to be contemplated by the reader.
History and freedom are very complex ideas and is a way that Morrison asks us to consider a reconstruction of the lost voices of the African American. History is not always objectively true since it is told from the perspective of the dominant culture. It silences all other voices. Freedom is reserved for the group that has the most power. We are reminded through *Beloved* that it is impossible to understand the history of slavery through the perception of a free society. Morrison attributes the writing of *Beloved* to a time when she was contemplating “what ‘free’ could possibly mean to women… and that these thoughts led [her] to the different history of black women in this country” (Morrison, Foreward xvi). Morrison points out that there is a discrepancy between what is considered freedom for women and what was considered freedom for a black slave woman in America. When contemplating freedom, Morrison cannot help but point us to the knowledge that “in the eighties, the debate [about what freedom meant to a woman] was still roiling” (Morrison, Foreward xvi). And these ideas of freedom centered on a woman’s choice to have children and “being responsible for them” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). Through her book we are asked to look at actions that would be constituted as barbaric by a free society and yet perceived differently when looked though the eyes of an enslaved mother such as Baby Suggs, who says, “Nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (Morrison 28). The reduction of children to playing pieces on a game board is indicative of the power over the children’s life that was taken from the enslaved parent. Black Americans during slavery did not have the power to protect themselves, let alone the children that they loved and brought into the world. And this has shaped our culture and world today. It is imperative that we hear this voice,
acknowledge this voice, and restore its ability for agency in our culture allowing for a new freedom for those that have been imprisoned.

The complicated matter of a person without any agency protecting their child is in fact pointed out by Morrison when her character Paul D. notes how “risky” it is “for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much” (Morrison 54). It was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing ... was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one. (Morrison 54)

Loving was a risk because the enslaved did not have the power to help the one they loved. The actions of slavery choked out and destroyed the ability of the black to love, even their own child. The life of a slave in America was not their own, but belonged to the white man to do with as he pleased. This reduction of humanity puts Sethe in such a perverted position that the only escape she can fathom for her child is death. Again, the narrative is pushing the reader, enticing the reader, and summoning from the reader a moral reaction and conclusion through these multiple viewpoints of murder and motherhood. By Morrison taking a piece of our history that is lost and restoring it through her fictional account of Beloved, Morrison allows for a new version of history to emerge. In fact, it fills in the gaps for a history that has been lost within our culture. Caroline Rody writes in “Toni Morrison’s Beloved: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss’” that “Morrison... [has] written into the incomplete canon of American literature the very chapter of American history it had long lacked” (93). She also goes on to write
that “Beloved is evidently a politically engaged novel” (Rody 94). Beloved’s subject matter of murder is a politically charged issue but it also can be viewed from an entirely different perspective. It is politically charged because it is asking us to have a moral response to a history that is finally being presented to us from the viewpoint of the actual group of people abused.

The mixing of genres that Morrison uses to reconstruct this history is also an important aspect and allows us to view Beloved from a postmodern and moral perspective. Beloved recreates the genre of a gothic romance to resurrect a silenced narrative. In fact, Beloved in a sense is gothic romance complete with its own ghosts. It follows in the tradition of such works as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, which has highly charged moral themes. The borrowing or imitation of previous forms is what has been established as pastiche and Morrison is adept and using these well known, familiar styles to the reader in order to re-invision the histories that have been lost. The reader is aware of the previous stories and can use their knowledge to make connections to the moral questions that Morrison is raising in her novels. But what makes this a different study of morality than Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter that also brought up questions of established moral codes? Possibly it is the hyperawareness in the postmodern experience to view the world based upon chaos and this contemplation may balk against the feel of the religious connotation of good and evil and that this viewpoint

---

2 Rody in her analysis is suggesting for a “psychological projection of reimagining an inherited past” (95).

3 In addition Beloved’s similarities to Hawthorne there is much scholarship regarding how Faulkner has also been a huge influence on Toni Morrison and can be considered in the book Unflinching Gaze Edited by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg.

4 Fredric Jameson.
of good and evil has never really been heard before. The postmodern experience today tends to place responsibility on the shoulders of the human and not deflected to an outside agent manipulating our actions. Morrison will ask the reader to “pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). The ghost in Beloved won’t be contemplating the vague subject of evil in the world but will focus our attention to a specific time in our history when we allowed freedom to be bequeathed upon a select few, and we will be allowed to see the viewpoint from a ghost of our own history. This could be considered ‘evil’ in the sense that we have manipulated and used the minority to fill the needs and desires of the majority that is in power. The reader will be asked to face our human actions and consider our responsibility to them from a different viewpoint that has been lost and silenced. The supernatural is used to illuminate a connection between the deaths of old narratives that will bring to life a lost history.

In this ghost story, our haunted house is not only pushing its inhabitants to respond to its despair, it is also reeling the reader into a psychological murder mystery in hopes that we will find the liable party of the murdered that “harbor[ed] so much rage” (Morrison 5). In her opening chapter, Morrison turns a wooden structure called “124” into a “spiteful” creature that was “full of baby’s venom” (Morrison 3). This spiteful house has contained many secrets through the years, as has our country’s history, histories that we would like to keep lost or simply erased and away from prying and curious eyes. We assuredly do not want to take responsibility for the actions that could indeed nullify our identity as a free nation. If we think that this house is one of a kind or an anomaly with its “sideboards [that] took a step, turned over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air,” we’d be wrong (Morrison 4). For we are reminded that,
“not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison 6). Morrison insinuates that the ghosts are everywhere, waiting to be heard, asking for recognition. These passages lead us down a path that Morrison asks us to contemplate. If the work of the reader is not to provide a verdict in the case of the murder of Beloved by her mother Sethe, than what are we led to contemplate. Since every “Negro” house in America is filled with grief and from the insinuation of the text, loss, it would seem as if we are being enticed by Morrison to reinstate a lost history to a grieving society that has been left incomplete and destroyed. Our ghost story is filled with music and poetry that speaks to our souls about lost songs that our straining to be heard in the background of the noisy postmodern life.

Another area in Morrison’s Beloved when we see her use of melding different types of genres together is her choice of non-linear narratives, music and poetry that creates a new understanding and compassion within our society. The use of the postmodern trait of pastiche is also seen clearly in Morrison’s work by her picking up and using multiple materials of narrative such as music and poetry. Again, this is to engage the reader into a reflection, almost unconsciously due to their artistic, lilting nature. Morrison uses these forms to move the reader into a response through her fluid and fluctuating styles. The prose is so complex that it requires the reader to piece together an understanding and meaning from a narrative that is full of layered voices, ideals, and moves. In a manner that is not dissimilar to the way that musicians and poets make the listener and reader work to come up with multiple definitions of its art. These moves by Morrison allow us to look at the murder of Beloved as voice of a culture that has been annihilated by the dominant white society that has destroyed it. It is like the layering of
instruments of a band on a track in order to create a full-bodied expression of the music. It gives the reader the ability to hear the contrasting expressions of our histories and freedoms in order to consider what they really mean for the entire society.

As the virtual tracks of the lost historical voices are layered upon each other in an extremely poetic fashion we begin to hear as they become alive and re-tell the lost stories. Clearly, this postmodern trait works very effectively. Ron Eyerman notes that it allows Morrison to restore “history [which] began as narrative and was formative of collective memory and identity” (159). This alludes to the history of song and spirituals that have helped African Americans remember the histories of their free ancestry. Memories and identities that have been repressed must be freed in order for our culture to grow and thrive.

As new voices emerge from the text, the reader begins to realize that the black experience in America and their narrative, or history, has been forever altered. In this realization the reader can see that “…when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever, and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” a trauma has occurred that has stunted our growth as a society (Eyerman 160). Karla Holloway aptly notes that it is this trauma that Morrison is trying to heal when she uses “narrative structures [that] have been consciously manipulated through a complicated interplay between the implicit orature of recovered and (re)membered events and the explicit structures of literature” (516). We can see how

---

5 I believe that Holloway is using this form of the word “(re)membered” in order to suggest that these are lost parts that are being reattached to the body of knowledge.
Morrison manipulates these structures when she makes moves towards the end of the narrative by beginning to skip punctuation and she moves the story of *Beloved* into an almost liturgical style. Morrison eloquently states in the Foreward of her novel, “to render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way” (Morrison, Foreward xix). The language on the page begins to shift. Instead of being static and fixed it begins to sound like a song or cry for freedom as the sentences move from staccato to fluid, as if a rushing wind is speaking these narratives back into the place of history. We begin to hear them falling into place as Beloved speaks of waiting to be found:

> I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken I am falling like the rain is I watch him eat inside I am crouching to keep from falling with the rain I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he put his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces she took my face away there is no one to want me to say my name I wait on the bridge because she is under it there is night and there is day. (Morrison 251)

It can be noted that within the text Morrison is not having the character Beloved only speak about being found; Beloved is somehow watching and waiting through night and day waiting for someone to want her and pick up the pieces of her broken narrative, an allegory for our lost history. As the reader does this they are exposed to a healing narrative that has been lost and has been crying to be heard even though “no one want(s) me” or will “say my name” (Morrison 251). The other narratives have been “taken” but this story is being restored by the rain falling like tears of a culture that has lost their history (Morrison 251). Not only has the voice of the culture been taken away but we can no longer see the faces of the lost. They have stopped being individuals, with individual stories. And it is easier to forget your victim if you never have to look into
their eyes. Beloved speaks that we “took [her] face away” (Morrison 251). As a society, we have wiped out the history of an entire race. It is profoundly painful to remove an entire culture’s face, and identity, and morally reprehensible to do so. Beloved’s song pleads with us to want to hear them and restore her broken history and identity so that she can be freed from the silence she has endured.

Finally, besides Morrison’s beautiful layering and pastiche we can see that the moral context or theme of murder is another way that she works with moral relativism in order to create or appropriate a lost history. As Morrison recreates for us a possible history that is lost we are reminded that, “historiography is inherently subjective” (Davidson Notes). It is subjective in the idea that it is not objective or free from personal biases and opinions. History is based upon the perspective of the person who wrote it. As Kimberly Chabot Davis writes, “much of postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly on revising our sense of what history means and can accomplish” (242). Beloved, considered through the postmodern viewpoint looks at varied reactions by the reader to the narrative and the social laws of murder. It also asks the reader to be concerned with a role and responsibility of a mother from a viewpoint of a black slave woman in America: a view that had never been recorded or considered in our culture. In order to understand the ethical complexity of the book, not only does the reader need to consider the murder of Beloved as an innocent child, but also a mother’s fierce determination to protect her child from a world that is distorted, perverted and

---

6 Linda Hutcheon in her work “Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History” writes, “The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "historiographic metafiction" (3).
violent. In this way Morrison presents to us a different view of murder: one that labels murder as protection instead of corruption. Sethe’s way of protecting Beloved is by not allowing anyone else to hurt her. In order for Sethe to ensure Beloved’s protection, she does the only thing she has the power to do: take Beloved’s life herself. Morrison clarifies this as she illuminates that “the heroine [Sethe] represent[s] the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume[s] the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim[s] her own freedom” (Morrison, Foreward xvii). Sethe’s act of violence towards her daughter, in her own eyes, was a loving and protective act. It is an act of power, not weakness. Sethe’s actions may seem immoral because of our inability to understand the world of slavery. The treatment of murder that Morrison presents to us in Beloved provides a way for us to acknowledge that it is impossible to have a traditional moral context within a corrupt world.

Multiple viewpoints to the murder prompt the reader to make conclusions about beliefs on freedom and choice. The narrative of the murder from several different viewpoints allows us to see the complexity of the world that Sethe lives in. We see the murder from the eyes of the “slave catcher” who views the murder as nothing more than a financial loss. He regards the woman swinging the child towards the “planks” as “gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who overbeat her and made her cut and run” (Morrison 176). Sethe is compared to chattel when the “Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education” (Morrison 176). This barbarism of viewing a human being as property that one group of people can beat, rape, or wreak violence against as long as it is for education so that they will learn to submit is repugnant. This viewpoint has been
silenced because the abused have no voice and the abusers do not want to admit to their perversity. When the reader is exposed to this destructive and vicious perspective, we are prodded to respond with revulsion to the white slave owner and the history of abuse associated with slavery.

As the reader contemplates the slave catchers’ reaction to the murder they are introduced to the perspective of the other enslaved that are “still mewing” and had “snatched the baby from the arc of the mother’s swing” (Morrison 175). The shock of what was occurring had paralyzed the entire group. The enslaved knew that there would never be any resurrection of the voice of the destroyed and the reminder of their subjugation has stripped them from the very power to speak. The slaves have become so indoctrinated into the abusive culture that they are rendered into babies, unable to communicate. Afraid and disempowered, they are stripped from all communication and are powerless to do anything about the macabre scene playing out in front of them. We are moved to compassion by this scarred and scared group and implored by the text to view a seemingly immoral act from a new and different perspective.

Juxtaposed against the empowered and powerless humans that the culture has created we are allowed to watch Sethe glower at her abusers. When we do, we see something different than what we have ever seen before. Sethe is a strong black woman with agency who is unwilling to live according to the established rules of society, no matter the consequences. Sethe “was looking at [the slave catcher] and if [the nephew] could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can’t mishandle creatures and expect success” (Morrison 175). Sethe doesn’t have to even speak for us to understand her contempt. The horrific abuse that Sethe had been living through of being
“nursed [by the nephew] while the bother held her down [and raped her]” has pushed her beyond the mainstream value system that a human being with civil rights adheres to. She has been forced to take action that is so defensive that as readers we are shocked when we realize it was her only possible choice for the protection of her child. Sethe looks different to the slave catcher because she has been pushed past the point of domination. She has made a decision that will jar the reader out of complacency and into a revelation of the sacrifice and loss it requires for a black woman to be free in a white society. Sethe has reminded the reader that freedom will only come at the cost of life. The freedom that has been presented to be available on earth is not available in the world that Sethe lives in because it is controlled by the dominant white society. We are then left to contemplate which role we would take on, and surprisingly, we are left without any choice that will situate itself comfortably within our hearts.

As we start to grapple with these unanswerable questions, we are shocked when the perpetrators of the crime against Sethe can’t understand her actions. In fact, the nephew thinks, “what did she go and do that for? On an account of a beating?” (Morrison 175) The nephew will associate his mistreatment and Sethe’s as the same for “he had been beat a million times” (Morrison 176). There will however not be any repercussion for his mistreatment of Sethe. In fact, the slave catcher dismisses the lot of them quite cavalierly when he says, “You all better go on. Look like your business is over” (Morrison 177). It is clear within this passage that the white man, no matter how abused he was, would never be held responsible for the destruction of a black woman. Therefore, it is preposterous to believe that the white nephew and the abused Sethe could ever have the same viewpoint and reaction to the death of Beloved. It is up to the reader to
contemplate these conflicting viewpoints and come to some sort of resolution to their meaning and implications. As the postmodern text presents to us these multiple viewpoints, we are left to unravel these thoughts within our minds to try to repair our society from the pain that we have experienced.

However, the text does not leave us hopeless. Social morality and responsibility within the text are made more vivid due to the text’s ability to present multiple sides to the narrative. The narrative is not static; it is just revealing to us that there has been a destruction of the established moral code of murder due to a society that has allowed extreme violence and neglect of human rights brought about by slavery in America. The act of slavery has so distorted the world that actions that seem impossible to the free are the only option left to the enslaved. But, in the destruction there is a possibility to hear a new voice. In one moment Sethe destroys the future, Beloved, by creating a narrative that “is not a story to pass on” or overlook (Morrison 324). We are not to overlook this story but listen to it because it helps us to see that there is no such thing as an objective history; there are multiple versions of history that need to be told in order for the entire picture to be seen. In this case, we are reminded of the lost voice of the abused black in America. A voice we need to hear to accurately reflect our history and understand our world today. The text is allowing us to speak the words of the lost narrative into our society in hopes that we will begin to heal and repair our world.

In conclusion, the book Beloved cannot be corned into one interpretation, but when considered under the traits of the postmodern novel we can see that it has the ability to present moral issues in a new and enlightening way in order for our society to heal and restore itself. If we are under any assumption that the fight for racial equality has been
won, Morrison will reveal our pride and continue to show us the complex restoration process and remind of us our moral lapse. She charges us morally to be aware that although everyone may know “what she [racism] was called…nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were how can they call her when they don’t know her name?” (Morrison 321) Morrison is using Beloved’s narrative to stand in place for the lost history of the black American. If we do not speak out and name the enemy (racism), how can we replace the history that we have lost? The marginalized culture is at risk of being “forgot [ten]…like a bad dream. After all we had made up their tales, shaped and decorated them” into a presentation that we felt reflected the American experience of freedom in all its glory (Morrison 321). The story of Beloved boldly asks us to look upon our American narrative with new moral eyes and to begin to honor these narratives even though they may bring out some of the ugliest chapters of our history.

In essence, *Beloved* is a version of history that becomes the voice of slavery. It cries out for us to have a conversation that allows a multi-layered version of that history to be heard and consider such controversial topics as slavery and murder in America. It begins to fill in the gaps and tells stories that have been silenced. The shock of a mother murdering her child becomes a place to investigate the complexities of slavery in America and stops us from coming to negative moral conclusions based upon a view of society that is one sided and incomplete. Morrison’s content in *Beloved* has many controversial layers that all have moral themes. It is important that we consider them in order to have a clearer view of some of the problems and questions we face.
CHAPTER III

IN COLD BLOOD: TRUMAN CAPOTE

A New Moral Awareness: All Men Might be Created Equal but are they Treated Equal?

Defining when and where the postmodern novel comes onto the literary scene may be difficult to pin down. Arguably, Capote’s *In Cold Blood* could be excluded from postmodern discussions. But I believe that can we add Capote’s work into the postmodern canon due to the embedded nature of pastiche with its pages. We can do so when we consider Capote’s novel by the same prior treatment of Morrison’s *Beloved* as postmodern novel.

The way we can use *Beloved* to argue *In Cold Blood*’s postmodern traits is by looking at the similarities of the texts in both form and content. Firstly, both Morrison’s and Capote’s stories rely upon a historical reference and relevance. Secondly, through the concept of pastiche, we can move through the same argument within the *Beloved* novel by looking at the genre of the crime and murder mystery novel and how Capote uses this genre in a new way to bring up societal concerns and issues that he wants us to confront. We can also look at how he uses non-linear narratives that leave holes for the reader in order for them to contemplate complex societal dilemmas. Thirdly, as with *Beloved*, we can look at Capote’s use of presenting multiple viewpoints in order to present a moral
relativism to the reader; Capote will share with us multiple viewpoints to the Holcomb murders in order for us to gain a new cultural perspective.

All of these attributes to Capote’s novel connects with the way that the postmodern novel has been able to comment upon moral issues in America. Although prior in date to many postmodern works, America was changing in the 1960s and the postmodern novel was on the forefront of these changes. The postmodern novel was a place where writers could consider some of the most conflicted moral issues that we were facing, such as violence and murder. As the counter-culture began to rise in America, we began to see a questioning of our concept of the typical American. At this point, the mainstream media started to insinuate itself deeper into our homes, and we began to realize that not everyone really lived like the Cleavers and has a perfect life. The realization was emerging that not all people really were being treated equally and if we valued the tenet of equality in the United States, how then did we digest the knowledge that more of us were marginalized, abused, discriminated against, and impoverished than we cared to admit? With the arising media culture allowing for a frenzied reaction to events, we begin to see the birth of a culture that will be obsessed with celebrity, even when that celebrity is the gruesome depiction of a derailed life. The pursuant, leering, and glaring gaze of crime-scene-investigation journalism was beginning to take shape in America.

Firstly, in order to dig into how *In Cold Blood* deals with moral themes in a postmodern text, we can look at how Capote uses a historical event that is relevant within the culture to create new literary genre. The American public had been whipped into a fevered pitch over the deaths of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas. The reader of *In
Cold Blood is invited, and debatably manipulated or forced, by the narrative to make judgments on the content of the text, which opens up many questions of morality to the reader. One of which is: who is responsible for murder, the murderers or the society that creates them?

Situated around a historical event, In Cold Blood is based upon a murder that actually took place in 1959 in Holcomb, Kansas. Capote, aware of the media mayhem and attention on this case, presents to us sketches of characters that break our preconceived notions regarding the responsibility and consequences of murder. James Lapsley has noted that, “it is a full scale application of case study methods developed in social welfare work, psychiatry, psychology, and pastoral care to a complex psychological phenomenon” (211). Although this novel could be looked at through the psychological case study mode that Lapsley suggests, we can arguably say that Capote is deliberately using and manipulating rhetorical strategies in order to make room for the reader to respond in uncharacteristic ways to the narrative. The narrative moves the reader emotionally by depicting the pain on both sides of the story. Capote works the reader by using this new genre and presenting the text in a new and complex way, and relying on the idea, such as in Reader Response Theory, which the reader will respond to the text in varied ways. He does this by presenting the story through the journalistic style: through Capote’s work as a journalist, we are given insight into the mind of an abused, disenfranchised man in “the heart of the nation” (Lapsley 210). Capote, however, dubbed this work a “non-fiction novel1” and he is merging with the journalistic endeavor the

---

1 Tom Wolfe in The New Journalism writes, “when Truman Capote insisted that In Cold Blood was not journalism but a new literary genre he invented, “the nonfiction novel,” a flash went through [his]
genre of fiction to present to the reader a story that he is arguably manipulating us to respond to. If the murders are committed in the heart of the nation then the pain and conflict they create will travel into our country via every artery and circulate throughout our nation affecting every bit of vitality we have. Capote is using his story to do the same thing, move into the culture, and affect society.

Prior to Capote’s creation of the hybrid non-fiction novel, readers had come to expect two categories, fact and fiction. Readers forced to consider both forms at one time are not only opened up to new possible readings of the narrative, they are actually thrust into new territory that requires them to sift through the information to come to possible new conclusions. This becomes complicated and best described on how to do by John Hersey in his essay, “The Legend on the License” when he says, “All we need to do is insist on two rules. The writer of the fiction must invent. The journalist must not invent” (1). With Capote’s work, it is impossible to make that insistence and it seems as if the blurring of these rules is what has made readers and critics question what Capote was doing in his work *In Cold Blood*.

---

mind.” The flash that went through his mind was an “Aha!” The aha was a “flash that allowed him to make a connection that “new journalism [was] beginning to look like an absolute rerun of the early days of the realistic novel in England” (37). The rerun that he is writing about is that new genres seem to create the same objections that the prior literary moves that are now accepted by critics had at the time of their beginnings. I think that is what makes the moral consideration of the postmodern novel so interesting. Critics consider the new genre as not artistic enough to speak on moral concerns. Readers however are not as discriminatory and will automatically start to create connections between the texts and the life around them.
This new genre of the mixing of a murder mystery/crime novel\(^2\) with journalism from Capote is a precursor to a style and from that will become a staple for the American public: Reality T.V. As we gobble up television shows like *Survivor* or even the newly announced Spike TV’s *Murder*, “which is a new *CSI*-like reality competition series where amateur gumshoes will try to correctly solve a real homicide that has been recreated for them” we tend to forget that these shows are actually scripted for an audience and not really reality at all (Rocchio). This is not unlike how Capote uses the two genres in order to create an effect on the audience. Even though there may have always been a human fascination with the crime or murder mystery genre, and even continuing today, it seems as if Capote has found an audience that has ability to recognize that our society was shifting and a hunger was beginning to form in a new way, enticing readers to join in and peer endlessly into a dark place in our society.

This postmodern text, due to its use of *pastiche* which blends old genres in a new way; and Capote’s use layering non-linear narratives in order for the reader to piece together information instead of coming to quick conclusions, again as in Morrison’s work, becomes a launching field for the reader to ask difficult moral questions regarding the culture and society of which they are a part of.

Capote knows the power of the crime and murder mystery novel and he is going to launch off of this genre; but there is a result to this shift, he will move the reader into a new experience with his work *In Cold Blood* by asking us to look at these ‘facts’

\(^2\) The murder mystery/crime novel presents clues to the reader in order that they can “virtually catch” the perpetrator. This genre is systematically set-up to present information to the reader (sometimes to lead them off-track) so that they can figure out the mystery. Obviously Capote was doing something else with this novel since the Clutter murder had been ingested into the mainstream media and readers of Capote’s book already knew the answer to the murder mystery.
from a new perspective. A new genre is created when Capote pens the first non-fiction literature novel. This new genre extends on the original form of (realism) while incorporating ‘the idea of’ an objective journalistic account. This postmodern hybrid, or perhaps ‘realist fiction’, and objective journalism reveal’s new ways of looking at an old concerns: how literature is a reflection and a commentary on morality in our society (Davidson Notes). The discussion of the blurring of fact and fiction clearly has led us to the contemplation of the new genre and how Capote is using the murder mystery/crime novel based upon fact in order to consider these new emerging societal themes. In fact we can see that Capote was way ahead of his time; he is able to see a future in American history when we will be glued to a television hearing the gruesome story of mass murders like the ones perpetrated by Charles Manson in Los Angeles and by Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech in order to try to understand what is happening in our society and culture. Capote appropriates prior literary styles and recombines them into a postmodern pastiche, to a narrative style that does not function within the same parameters and structures of the past. This hype and fascination for stories of real life murders has opened up a marketplace for a novel that peers into the dark world of murder and violence; Capote just saw and capitalized on it earlier then the rest. But just because it capitalizes on these cultural tendencies and voyeuristic appetites does it stop us from questioning if these narratives bring awareness to us about the intricate moral problems we face? It is the way that authors like Capote are able to put the narratives together that allows us to be able to question the relationship between nature and nurture. Soon the postmodern view will begin to look deeply into the grand narratives that we have held onto and start to disassemble them. In this new societal condition, we are somehow left in between chaos
and design as Capote begins to move us, as readers, in between response and responsibility. The novel that Capote pens begins to blend these worlds by using the postmodern form of pastiche in his writing of the new non-fiction novel genre in order to show multiple viewpoints and perspective to the Holcomb murders.

This leads me to the third way that *In Cold Blood*, just as in *Beloved* by Morrison, Capote will use multiple viewpoints to the murder so that we may consider responsibility from varied perspectives. Capote wants us to believe that this work is based upon fact when he states in his “acknowledgments” that, "all the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned, more often than not numerous interviews conducted over a considerable period of time” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* Acknowledgements). This seems somewhat vague in explanation when he is clear to state that there is material in this book that was “not derived from [his] own observation” and in addition that the “material… [was] conducted over a considerable period of time”; both of which tend to lend a suspicious nature to the prose (Capote, *In Cold Blood* Acknowledgements). It insinuates that not all of the information can be deemed entirely reliable; and it is difficult to believe that there could be an objective account to this story due to Capote’s close relationship to the perpetrators.

Objectivity becomes a problem in many ways but even more so when we consider how Capote himself became very entrenched within the lives of the murderers. There are still circulating rumors as to the relationship that was cultivated by Capote with

---

3 It is interesting to note that Capote’s account of the Clutter murders was notoriously subjective. He relied completely on his memory of the conversations and interviews he obtained.
Smith. Deborah Davis in *Party of the Century: The Fabulous Story of Truman Capote and His Black and White Ball* states that, “Some observers felt that Truman’s fascination with Smith was way more than intellectual curiosity. Harold Nye, an officer with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, was convinced that Truman and Smith had become lovers during their long interview sessions together in Smith’s cell” (64). We begin to see that there is more than just an objective journalistic account when it comes to the information that we are garnering as readers from the text and this allows us as readers to consider the work in greater depth or as Donald Pizer declares eloquently, “The advantage of this particular form of documentation… is that it not only creates an effect of authenticity but also permits theme to be introduced implicitly rather than explicitly” (112). Capote’s use of this documentation, that presents implicit instead of explicit themes, allows for a moral relativism in which the reader considers the murders from a complex and varied point of view. We begin to be unable to unravel Capote’s journalistic experience of the murders from the life of his book and we are asked to look with a more discerning eye to the text in order to figure out what the difference between fact and fiction is.

We can see that Capote capitalizes on America’s fascination with the murder and embarks upon a journey to enter the lives, interview, become friends with and write a non-fiction novel about the victims and people that were affected by the murder and its perpetrators. The reader is required to sift through material that is written as a true account but is actually from the perspective of an outsider, Capote. As we are reading this book it seems natural that questions of ethics arise regarding how Capote got the information and if it is morally acceptable to use that information and to gain notoriety by
it. We can also ask if Perry Smith shared his story with Capote in hopes that his celebrity would save him from receiving the death penalty. We can add even greater emphasis to this idea of pastiche that Capote is creating when we look at the narration of the novel. As Tom Wolfe notes in his book *The New Journalism*, “one gets a curious blend of third-person point of view and omniscient narration” and this mimics a confessional text and in fact these are Capote’s words and not Smith’s (116). How much of it as a reader are we to believe actually come from Smith and are not meanderings that Capote has made up to make a better story? These blurred lines between the facts of the case and the narrative of the story sets America up for a new type of realism: a sort of voyeurism that leads to a reality T.V. junkie generation that hungers to watch and feed upon the unfortunate lives of broken people.

A moral dilemma is created for the reader, by Capote, when he incites within us conflicting reactions to the narrative. This reader is able to look at morality from not only one viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of many. He layers this narrative in a way that allows for multiple perspectives and cobbles them together in order to create a picture of the events that is not easily viewed or understood. We are both horrified with the violence of the murder of the Clutter family and at the same time moved to pity at the neglect and pain of the murderer, Perry Smith. As we are allowed into the mind of Smith we are awed by the discrepancies we see in his thought process and choices, if indeed we subscribe to the idea that he had choices or if his ‘profile’ actually leads him down the only path accessible to him which is that of killer.

Capote works meticulously with the facts and narrative as we are introduced to the Clutter family and their day-to-day lives, and then gruesomely depicts the murder.
James Lapsley notes that Capote uses methods of investigative journalism which included “the principal investigator, Alvin Dewey…and the two convicted murderers…whom he came to know well and who trusted him—and by carefully cross checking various versions of events, Capote made every effort to stay close to the facts” (211). Staying close to the facts is how Capote begins to insinuate the journalistic endeavor into his narrative. The work that Capote does by allowing us to see the murders from multiple viewpoints is clarified by Tom Wolfe in his work The New Journalism when he states, “the technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character giv[es] the reader the feeling of being inside the character’s mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it” (32). These multiple viewpoints allow the reader to become close to all of the characters within the pages of Capote’s investigation and this lends the ability to the reader to become emotionally involved and connected to the events.

The narrative is riddled with snapshots of scenes that sound as if you are reading a newspaper. The violence of the murder is not lost on the reader as we are given a graphic depiction of Nancy Clutter. It is sensationalized by Capote in order for the reader to respond in an entirely different way. As Tom Wolfe writes in “Pornoviolence” found in Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine, the American public’s “new pornography [is] the pornography of violence” and Capote is ready to jump on to the American fascination with violence in a clear and disturbing way (180). Capote will write

---

4 Tom Wolfe’s definition of Pornoviolence reads, “Pornography come from the Greek word “porne,” meaning harlot, and pornography is literally the depiction of the acts of harlots. In the new pornography, the theme is not sex.” Wolfe is therefore implying that it is violence.
that Nancy Clutter had, “been shot in the back of the head with a shotgun held maybe two inches away. She was lying on her side, facing the wall, and the wall was covered with blood” (In Cold Blood 62). The starkness of the passage reaches out and grabs us still today. We are also shown the coldhearted murder of her mother whose “mouth had been taped with adhesive, but she’d been shot point-blank in the side of the head, and the blast—the impact—had ripped the tape loose. Her eyes were open. Wide open” (Capote, In Cold Blood 63). The story is as sharp, menacing, and cold as the horrific events of the crime scene. The reader will not be given any quarter when it comes to the gruesome sight and Capote wants it that way. We have let the cameras in, so to speak. Since we have allowed the media in we in turn will look unabashedly with keen eyes at the grainy black and white pictures that have not been Photo-Shopped. Capote knows that the reader will be aghast at the murder scene and will predominately feel angered and shocked by the crime that was committed. It could be considered that Capote might be even provoking the reader into response. But he is also sure that we won’t turn away; and he wants to entangle us between the two worlds of journalism and narrative.

Part of Capote’s plan in spinning us into these contradictions is because he is banking on the knowledge that America was well aware of the murders prior to the book being released; and the consensus that it was fairly indisputable that the atrocious murders were unprovoked. This is especially true and gruesome if the booty for the murderers was the supposed $40 dollars that was in the Clutter’s safe. It would seem as if these macabre scenes would only solidify America’s lynch-mob mentality towards the murderers, but Capote wanted to present another view. Although the reader is not per se shocked when they read the horrific account, because they are familiar with the story,
they might be confused or angered when Capote introduces them into the mind of the neglected Perry Smith and will have to reconsider everything that they think they “know” about murder and how society should punish those who commit it.

Perry Smith is not depicted by Capote as a one-dimensional maniacal killer. At times, the reader is moved to pity Smith and his idiosyncrasies of chomping on “three aspirin, cold root beer, and a chain of Pall Mall cigarettes” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 14). It seems as if Perry could be someone that we might know. He may be a little peculiar, but then that is not uncommon. As we continue to get to know Perry we find that he had been in jail most of his adult life, and had been abused and neglected throughout his childhood. This abuse and neglect is sketching out to the reader a child that we all know someone should have helped to get out of the impoverished and abused world that he lived in.

Since we are being moved to see the helplessness in Perry and his abuse we are looking to find some sort of redeeming quality in him, and we find it. Capote incites us by the language that he chooses to see Perry in a different way. The abuse and idiosyncratic behavior of Perry shown to us by Capote helps us to humanize him. We can see ourselves in Perry. We begin to see a man that has problems and has faced adversity. Emotionally it connects us to Perry. Capote is systematic in doing this so that we will become conflicted and unable to box Perry into the simple character of an evil monster. In fact, it balks against such reductive binaries as “good” and “evil” and helps us to contextualize the postmodern world, and allows for the multiple layers of humanity to be seen. You could argue that it has become more ‘real’ in the aspect that it allows for the varied aspects of the new postmodern world.
Even the crime scene seems to point to some type of “kindness” in Perry. We see this when the murder scene is depicted where it looked as if Mr. Clutter was made “more comfortable” by laying a mattress box for him to lay on and that Mrs. Clutter and Nancy were almost “tuck[ed]…in [to bed]” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 103). Capote brings in this complicated side of the murderer so that the reader is shocked into a possible new perspective. The chapters are not written chronologically, so it is later that we find out that Perry is neglected and abandoned by his alcoholic mother and abused by his father. This is another way that Capote plays with the reader and withholds information. We are shown a murderer who embraces both anger and kindness; he is a monster and protector, a killer and a savior. Even the murdered Mrs. Clutter sees something in Perry when “she started asking about Dick. She didn’t trust him [Dick], but she said she felt that I [Perry] was a decent young man” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 242). This of course is according to Perry in his first-person account, which the reader must take into context and question its validity. Either way we find the “decent” Perry in the next few moments would “t[ie]…[Mrs. Clutter] with her hands in front of her, so that she looked as though she were praying…the cord was around her ankles, which were bound together…and lying there, scared out of her wits…because she must have watched him do it” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 63). The conflicts seem to mount up and the reader is left to contemplate an uncomfortable fondness for the monster. We are unsure who Perry is; in one moment he is to be trusted and in the next a malicious murderer. Capote deliberately uses these conflicts in order for him to present multiple versions of human nature.

Not only is there some sort of kindness in Perry, he is also depicted as a protector in the fact that he does also not allow Dick to rape the teenage Nancy Clutter. In
our narrative Perry tell us that, when he “found [Dick] had taken the girl to her bedroom. She was in the bed, and he was sitting on the edge of it talking to her. I stopped that!” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 242). It is here that the narrative insinuates that Dick was going to sexually assault young Nancy. Perry has a higher moral code and stops the additional abuse of the terrified girl, as if the carnage of the murder were not enough. It is hard to discern what is actually truth, and what are the musings of Capote, but all of these conflicting sketches of humanity and insight into the psychology of a killer throws the reader off balance and makes it impossible to find a simple answer to the question of who is responsible for the murder of the Clutters. Capote is playing with the reader. He has set the reader up to feel compassion for Perry Smith, a man who at the time the reader was reading was already dead. Capote and the reader already know the outcome of this murder and if conventional moral suppositions prevail, justice prevailed. Capote, it seems, is eliciting a possible new response from the reader by inciting the reader to feel pity for a man that is already dead. The death of Perry is irrevocable and as readers, we are then left to muse at Capote’s purpose.

Capote and the reader are not the only ones who find redeeming qualities in Perry. Eyewitness accounts that Capote inserts into the text also reiterate feelings of sympathy towards Perry Smith. Even after Perry has committed these crimes we are still allowed to glimpse something redeeming in Perry as he resides in the Finney County Courthouse. His keepers, “the Meiers, who had been married for more then twenty years…were kindly” (Capote, *In Cold Blood* 252). Josie Meier notices that Perry “had such a quiet way of speaking, almost a whisper”. This is such a contrary description to the brash murderer that we expect. She can tell that “the man is being torn apart”. Again,
we see vulnerability in Perry. Josie after talking to him decides that, “he wasn’t the worst young man [that she] ever saw” (Capote, In Cold Blood 253). It seems impossible to believe that the man in the cell at the courthouse could possibly be the same one that so viscously murdered the Clutter family. But we gain even further insight, and perhaps empathy, to the young man when we read final written statement:

I was born Perry Edward Smith Oct. 27 1928 in Huntington, Elko County, Nevada…I remember my mother was “entertaining” some sailors while my father was away. When he came home a fight ensued, and my father, after a violent struggle, threw the sailors out & proceeded to beat my mother. I didn’t really understand why he was beating her but I felt she must have done something dreadfully wrong…my father and brother beat me…I was continuously in trouble…my mother was always drunk, never in fit condition to properly provide and care for us. I run as free & wild as a coyote…I was in & out of Detention Homes many many times for running away from home & stealing… I was severely beaten [for wetting the bed] by the cottage mistress, who had called me names and made fun of me in front of the boys….She would throw back the covers & furiously beat me with a large black leather belt—pull me out of bed by my hair & drag me to the bathroom & throw me in a tub & turn the cold water on & tell me to wash myself and the sheets. Every night was a nightmare. Later on she thought it was very funny to put some kind of ointment on my penis. This was almost unbearable. It burned something terrible. (Capote, In Cold Blood 275)

This heart-wrenching letter is so powerful because it gives us the ability to understand and pity the soul that had endured so much abuse that society had placed upon him that we can only wonder what we might have done if subjected to the same things. Capote’s strategy is to elicit this response of pity towards Perry. This allows his text to become far richer in meaning and purpose. Due to the lack of an objective account by Capote it is impossible to know whether this was just a way for him to capitalize on a sensational news story or if Capote himself was moved by compassion for the broken Perry Smith. Either way, the reader is moved and will then begin to question the fate of Perry. It will be impossible for the reader not to consider the social ramifications of
helping children from broken, atrophied homes. The reader may even have to think about possible other outcomes to Perry Smith’s life, if someone, somewhere, would have stepped in and helped the hurting child.

As the trial of the murderers’ resumes, the question of punishment and responsibility looms in front of us again as spectators to the melee Green and Par bring up the very questions that readers may have been asking themselves. Green says, “Perry Smith. My God. He’s has such a rotten life—.” And Par answers back, “[He] killed four people in cold blood.” We, as readers, have had the same response to story the Capote has unfolded in front of us. Capote will cleverly have Green speak the next concern that is in our hearts when he retorts, “Yeah, and how about hanging the bastard? That’s pretty god-dam cold blooded too.” (Capote, In Cold Blood 306) Clearly Capote is using their words to have the reader contemplate these ideas and realize that there is no easy answer to this argument.

Capote will continue to force the reader in to multiple reactions to the narrative when we can’t help but associate our feelings with Mrs. Meier, who is burdened by the verdict: she “still feel[s] bad about it”. The last thing that Perry gives Mrs. Meier is a “Kodak made when he [Perry] was sixteen years old. He said it was how he wanted me to remember him, like the boy in the picture”. And we do remember him that way and we feel exactly like Mrs. Meier because “we kn[o]w where he was going, and what would happen to him” (Capote, In Cold Blood 308). And we somehow feel as bereft as the little squirrel that Perry befriended that continues to come and look for the lost boy.

In Cold Blood, in both form and content, is a complex book that considers intensely polar and contradictory moral dilemmas that our society faces. As Lapsley
notes, “If unkept, cultural promises loaded the shotgun that eventually killed the Clutters, it was cultural expectation…that gave Perry Smith the desperate courage needed to cut Clutter’s throat” (214). It is time to step back and ask ourselves these difficult questions of justice and equality in America. What are our expectations as a culture? How do we handle our neglect of the child known as Perry Smith? If we had intervened would the results have been different? How can we expect an abused, frightened child turn in to a productive member of our society? Can a new postmodern genre, the non-fiction, novel help us to answer these questions?

First, we must be willing to ask ourselves these difficult questions regarding murder, responsibility, and the consequences to it in our society. However, it is clear to see that just by reading the content of Capote’s story we must go one step further and consider the form. The form insists upon us considering the ethics of writing such a novel. Who gains from its creation? If Perry was given no mercy, which he was not as he was executed by hanging on April 14, 1965, what becomes the purpose of this novel? Do we vilify Capote, the author, or do we hail him for bringing us a new way to view the journalistic attempt?

It is difficult to tease out how we should feel about it. But one possible reading of the text seems to hold us accountable to consider Capote’s *In Cold Blood* as a depiction of humanity that might stop us from making a hasty disregard of the issue of abuse, equality and societal interaction. As David Richter states in “Keeping Company in Hollywood: Ethical Issues in Nonfiction Film,”

Capote’s tacit bargain with the murderers, especially the more complex killer Perry Smith, is that they will share the intimate details of their lives because he is writing
a book that will humanize them, and that he will help them with the appeal process as much as he can. (146)

Not only does Capote use Smith to gain insight but he also seems to thwart the new friend that he made when he tells Smith that “he was unable to find them a new lawyer when in fact he had not looked for one and had no intention of doing so” (Richter 147). Perry Smith received nothing from the sale and production of this novel. The book was released in 1966. Both Perry Smith and Dick Hickock were executed by hanging on April 14, 1965. Capote became famous. And if those are the only results of the novel it would seem as if we might have missed a gift that Capote put in our laps.
CHAPTER IV

IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS:
TIM O’BRIEN

A New Moral Responsibility: A Global
Moral Awareness

The novel most widely recognized as postmodern within this grouping, *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O’Brien can also be read in the same manner as Morrison and Capote when considering themes of morality. O’Brien’s work fits very easily into the same criteria of consideration: historical relevance and reference, the use of multiple genres and the recreation of the murder mystery novel\(^1\) and its ability to consider questions of morality in our society from multiple viewpoints.\(^2\)

O’Brien, similar to Morrison and Capote, finds his muse for *In the Lake of the Woods* firmly embedded in history. This foundation differs only in the fact that not only is this story found in the headlines of our newspapers; it is also an integral part of the author himself. O’Brien, a Vietnam Veteran, confronts the demons of history and his own life within the pages of his novel. If only for a moment, I’d like to reconsider why this historical relevance is so pivotal to the argument towards a moral consideration of the postmodern text; it is to present to the reader the possibility of previously unconsidered, hidden, or forgotten moral perspectives.

---

\(^1\) Both of which are uses of pastiche a la Jameson.

\(^2\) This is the work of moral relativism, which allows for new moral perspectives to be considered.
The historical significance of O’Brien’s Vietnam is an area of history that has been arguably erased from our consciousness. As Charles Baxter says it has become a sort of “historical amnesia” (“Shame and Forgetting in the Information Age” 141). Timothy Melley writes that, “narratives about amnesia [such as O’Brien’s]...seem to reflect the postmodern condition: the fragmentation of the self into parts not available to consciousness or memory (“Postmodern Amnesia” 108).” It would then seem that O’Brien’s rendition of the postmodern novel would be extremely beneficial in order to contemplate the response and responsibility to a morally ambiguous, forgotten, history of the Vietnam era. *In the Lake of the Woods* takes head-on the issue of Vietnam and its effect on its veterans. There is a reason that as a majority we have created a rather selective historical amnesia. The Vietnam era is hardly digestible to this day for the American public. O’Brien eloquently states, “Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it” (“The Vietnam in Me” 52). Vietnam is largely forgotten due to our inability to handle the moral implications found within its regime; we refuse to remember its implications so that we are no longer riddled with regret over the treatment of the few soldiers that returned. Samuel Cohen writes,

*In the Lake of the Woods*’ chief concern is less the war in Vietnam and its far reaching effects than the way we think and talk about the past [and it] can be read as more than an expression of the contradictions inherent in the ways in which we think about the past and about representation. (Cohen 221-223)

Representation is a key to our consideration of the moral implications within this postmodern text. The history that O’Brien is asking us to revisit is not one that we can go back and change, but we can use the past to consider our future. Pico Iyer claims that “Lake looks head-on at those unfashionable old friends, morality and evil” (74). If we
join the mystery that O’Brien is taking us on, and peer into the depths of our unfashionable friends, we may find that in its depths there will be many intersections between fact and fiction.

Fact and historical relevance can be directly found within the pages of O’Brien’s essay “The Vietnam in Me.” In this personal narrative by O’Brien we can clearly see some of the source material from his own life that he has embedded into the narrative. O’Brien himself understood the moral weight that he was taking on in his novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, when he tells John Mort in an interview that his work took “a stab at trying to understand evil” (1991). Partially, I believe, it is O’Brien’s way of dealing with his own private inner demons, but these inner demons that O’Brien is contemplating also have a public face. O’Brien’s willingness to suggest that he was trying to contemplate the ideas of good and evil is a testimony to *In the Lake of the Woods*’ moral theme and the importance of the readers’ ability to respond to this historical amnesia.

O’Brien himself recounts his historical steps in Vietnam and we find that his character John Wade has some eerie similarities to the author. O’Brien goes on his pilgrimage with Kate, his partner. It would be remiss to not mention that Wade’s missing wife is named Kathy. Like Wade’s Kathy, O’Brien’s Kate is “better…at human dynamics, more fluid and spontaneous” (O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me” 55). Similarly, and even more eerily, is that O’Brien’s Kate has been lost, too. O’Brien “returned to Vietnam with a woman whose name is Kate, whom I adored and have since lost. She’s with another man, seven blocks away.” (O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me” 48) O’Brien’s loss of Kate may be to a man seven blocks away but, he has lost his love as Wade has lost
his Kathy. We may not be sure what has happened to Wade’s Kathy but we do believe that Wade loved her for in the depths of the footnotes we read, “this is a love story” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 301). And within the few short lines in “The Vietnam in Me” we are able to feel a love that O’Brien still carries for his Kate. The fictional life of John Wade clearly mimics the real life of Tim O’Brien. O’Brien uses his life experiences that are painful, real, and poignant in order to create a realistic backdrop for the novel *In the Lake of the Woods*. The postmodern existence is comfortable with these different lives converging; it is part of the ability of the postmodern life to understand the concept of people having multiple facets and responsibilities as seen in the overlap of information we find between O’Brien’s personal life and his life as an author.

O’Brien not only has the figures of Kate and Kathy as an historical launching point; they are also a way that O’Brien blurs the relationship between fact and fiction. Wade is also mirrored to O’Brien himself. O’Brien “called back to memory—not to memory exactly, but to significance—some painful feelings of rejection as a child. O’Brien remembers himself as being a “chubby friendless and lonely” and having “a desperate love craving that propelled me” (O’Brien, “The Vietnam in Me” 50). As readers, we will find some of the same qualities in the character of Wade. Wade remembers, “in the fourth grade, when [he] got a little chubby, his father used to call him Jiggling John. It was supposed to be funny. It was supposed to make John stop eating” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 67). The reader is again reminded of how powerful memory and history are to the human spirit and how sometimes it is easier to forget that

---

3 I will consider footnotes in more depth as I continue.
history than deal with the emotional ramifications and hurt caused by it. Wade and O’Brien morph into one as we contemplate their desperate cry for love and acceptance a condition that as readers we can draw our own experiences and nuances to. It also clarifies how the postmodern existence is an amalgamation of all information and global in scope.

If the evidence hasn’t stacked up enough to draw a strong correlation between an acknowledgment of the blurring of fact and fiction in order to consider a reconstruction of a lost narrative in and the moral implications of the Vietnam war, we could point to references by O’Brien to the “buzz of some low-level paranoia” that he alludes to while revisiting Vietnam with Kate and the flies he encounters while visiting Mr. Tan (“The Vietnam in Me” 54). But mostly we can draw attention to O’Brien’s plea to remember, and consider what we lose when we forget. “Now more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention…brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance” (“The Vietnam in Me” 52). O’Brien is morally charging us to remember Vietnam and to confront the demons that plague him and our nation.

O’Brien uses a familiar genre to create the postmodern novel, and a vehicle of moral consciousness. *In the Lake of the Woods* is crafted to look like the easily digestible bestseller, a murder mystery for an unsuspecting audience. It is only upon closer

---

4 *In the Lake of the Woods* is riddled with references to the flies that swarmed after the My Lai killings.

5 O’Brien is referring to My Lai.
inspection into the form that we begin to recognize the mastery of this postmodern
hybrid. Taken a step farther then Capote’s Non-Fiction Novel, O’Brien isn’t an ‘after the
fact note taker’ in the field that is guessing at the emotional perspective of the murderer.
In fact, in Capote’s story we already knew who the murderer was. In O’Brien’s we will
never find out. O’Brien and his personal experience with murder, war, destruction, and
violence in Vietnam are embedded into the narrative. Part of O’Brien’s tactic to engage
the reader is the way he highlights the complicated relationship between fact and fiction.
O’Brien is showing eroding the collective amnesia that we have engaged in as he reminds
the reader of a past that is thinly hidden beneath the surface of our consciousness. He
goes one step farther than Capote’s In Cold Blood because In the Lake of the Woods isn’t
going to leave us guessing at the validity of the facts. O’Brien gives us the facts within
the footnotes, after of course he hooks us with the narrative. It is within the blurred lines
of the relationship between the known facts and narrative fiction that O’Brien creates a
world that asks the reader to suspend their conventional beliefs regarding morality in
times of war and consider its consequences from a re-envisioned perspective.

We are introduced to the characters John Wade and his wife, Kathy, through
the genre of a murder mystery novel. Within the first few pages we are set up to read a
story about a man who has lost everything and seemingly his wife, Kathy, also. We are
not sure at first what has happened to Kathy. We only begin to be aware that something

---

6 I would like to take note that this actually shows how much the postmodern novel is able to
morph and change with the current cultural perspectives. In Capote’s book In Cold Blood, which was
written in 1965, we can see how he uses the re-telling of a murder mystery that we already know the
answer to in order for the reader to contemplate a new response to murder in our culture. In contrast, In the
Lake of the Woods mimics the postmodern condition of a later time in history (1994) when the culture has
shifted into even a deeper distrust of grand narratives. We can see the result of this in O’Brien’s book,
which doesn’t attempt to give us an answer to the murder but pushes the reader to have a bigger global
picture of the consequences to our actions and our global moral responsibility.
has happened to her when we read, “In the days afterward, when she was gone, he would remember this with perfect clarity, as if it were still happening (O’Brien, In the Lake of the Woods 7). It is our first clue that something is wrong and that Kathy is gone. As we embark upon the murder mystery it may come as a shock to us that the second chapter begins to introduce us not to a typical narrative with the clues to her whereabouts riddled within the prose but instead we receive a sort of laundry list of clues called “Evidence”. This evidence includes footnotes from famous authors, and politicians, and interviews from some of Wade’s family, friends, and acquaintances.

The value that we can find in O’Brien’s creation of this postmodern form is that it forces us out of the world of the narrative and into a form of non-fiction reading that blends realism into a postmodern awareness and it allows for moral relativism. The reader isn’t given the answers as in the traditional genre, he allows for the reader to consider the moral themes to the text. O’Brien’s play on the murder mystery novel includes a twist on the “who done it” factor. The typical murder mystery novel sets up a puzzle that the reader must discern within its pages and clues. The typical novel does not disappoint and leads the reader through the clues to the desired conclusion: the revelation of the murderer. What makes O’Brien’s In the Lake of the Woods so postmodern, and in turn an interesting moral contemplation, is its refusal to follow the form of the genre. David Piwinski nails this point when he clarifies that “the postmodernist, deliberately ambiguous nature of this novel does not allow a definitive answer to the question” of what exactly happened to Kathy Wade. In actuality, we are never to learn if Kathy was even murdered (201). We are left to contemplate many possible outcomes to Kathy’s disappearance.
O’Brien shrouds Wade and the narrative in mystery and confusion. O’Brien uses a third person narrator to further complicate matters. The information that we receive from Wade, our protagonist, is therefore tentative at best. In fact the reader is alerted early on by Wade himself that “some things he would remember clearly. Other things he would remember only as shadows, or not at all. It was a matter of adhesion. What stuck and what didn’t” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 17). This admission by Wade thrusts the reader into the contemplation of Wade’s mental state of mind and the reliability of his narration and memory of the events. The reader can only tentatively, at best, trust the information that Wade gives due to his own admission of amnesia. Pico Iyer notes that the “…clean, incantatory prose always hovers on the edge of a dream, and his specialty is that twilight zone of chimeras and fears and fantasies where nobody knows what’s true and what is not” (74). In this way we can see that O’Brien is deliberately playing with the prose; pushing the reader to hover in an in between state of consciousness that will allow the breakdown of preconceived perspectives regarding our role and responsibility in Vietnam.

O’Brien does not want the reader to find the “definitive answer” to who done it. Relying again on the reader’s response to the text, O’Brien complicates the genre in order to push the reader into uncomfortable territory that will force the reader to think outside of the standard rules of the genre. This breaking out of tradition allows the narrative to be considered from new and variant points of view, just as Morrison pushed us to view Beloved’s murder in a new moral context and Capote pushed us to view

---

7 Timothy Melley considers in depth this idea in “Postmodern Amnesia: Trauma and Forgetting in Tim O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*.”
murder in a new societal perspective. O’Brien pushes us to look at a new global perspective of Vietnam. Lawrence J. Oliver notices that “ironically, this postmodernist novel which repeatedly questions the existence of objective truth seems almost unbearably true at times.” There is a ‘truth’ that O’Brien is asking the reader to confront by trying to sift through the information in the narrative and the footnotes. Oliver goes on to say that this “frustrating and fascinating narrative that [is] like life itself, creates riddles without answers.” This writing begs us, as readers, to begin to see and understand a new truth: a truth that we had previously not seen or overlooked, like one of the clues in a mystery novel. This ambiguity works with the genre to create an “aha” moment for the reader. The reader’s objective to O’Brien is found within its form. He reminds us of our folly in trying to find a simple answer to fault when he writes, “…if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 30). There will not be the typical cookie cutter ending of the mystery novel. *In the Lake of the Woods* is bending the genre in order to break the readers’ pre-conceived notions of guilt and responsibility in order for them to gain or perceive a new moral perspective.

This form both undermines the narrative and the objectivity of evidence at the same time. One of the major themes that O’Brien brings to the table is the nagging, unanswered question of John Wade’s responsibility in the My Lai killings. If we can’t entirely blame Wade for the murders we are pushed to look into the narrative in a new way in order to find new avenues to understand what happened at My Lai. As Wade

---

8 Thus, *In the Lake of the Woods* “may best be described as a postmodernist war/mystery novel” (Oliver).
cannot discern between his dreams and reality, the reader is left to sift through the same confusion between historical myth and nationalism, our dreamlike state of denial, and the reality of My Lai. Samuel Cohen adequately surmises the issue with the novel not having a concrete ending or solution when he writes, “…such closure would undercut the novel’s insistence on mystery, on unknowability; more importantly it would undercut the frustration readers share with O’Brien’s narrator as he finds himself unable to construct a coherent narrative of the past” (233). In fact O’Brien’s narrator serves as a sort of proxy for the reader. This allows O’Brien to use the frustration that the reader feels and pushes them to dig more deeply into history in order to grapple with the questions of culpability.

O’Brien’s choice to break tradition with the typical genre of a murder mystery is also valuable because it startles the reader into a contemplation of the text that has greater value to consider moral questions because it is based upon events that have actually occurred. Since the narrative voices are speculative, the reader begins to sift through what seems to be more reliable, which brings us to O’Brien’s use of footnotes. If there is any sense of “evidence” or accuracy to help the reader to counteract the unreliability of the narrator it is found in the footnotes. The ability to create a book that is a hybrid between a fiction novel and a footnoted research paper is actually quite difficult⁹. This is where the postmodern use of pastiche comes alive within this novel. Judiciously interwoven in the story are facts about the soldier’s life, Wade, which gives us valuable insights to his character and the violence to which he has been exposed. This hybrid form allows for gradations of authority in the novel. Since the reader cannot rely

---

⁹ I have actually tried to write a fiction piece like O’Brien’s in order to contemplate how one would organize such copious information. The process was laborious, and results were tentative at best.
upon the narrator, they look for authority and facts within the footnotes. Marjorie Worthington in her work “The Democratic Meta-Narrator in In the Lake of the Woods” notes how the “footnotes with which the highly intrusive narrator inserts editorial comments and personal asides… reinforce the idea of the story-truth” (121). Footnotes themselves, are associated with fact. They are found within research papers, theses, and have historical relevance\(^\text{10}\). They point to facts and evidence that a postmodernist has become quite accustomed to sifting through within the postmodern mystery genre such as Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy, which includes City of Glass, Ghosts and The Locked Room. These fictional mystery narratives, that use the name of the author as the main character, have in fact prepared us for such a novel as O’Brien’s. Their hybridism between fact and fiction has already put into motion the power of the reader’s ability connect abstract ideas together. O’Brien will attach it to our country’s moral confusion that surrounds the Vietnam War and require a moral response from the reader. The savvy postmodern reader is quite capable of handling complex information that is interconnected to other narratives and patterns in order to understand the clues that they are receiving from the text. This form tempts the reader to look for clues and answers in a more scientific way than through the narrator and a more complex way by including information that the reader has gathered through their previous experiences.

These gradations of authority deepen the effect of the book by undermining the narrator and authorizing the objectivity of evidence. When the author undermines the objectivity of the text, controversial issues can be broached that make the reader question

\(^{10}\) Anthony Grafton’s, The Footnote: A Curious History sheds much light on the use and history of footnotes. “Many books offer footnotes to history: they tell marginal stories, reconstruct minor battles, or describe curious individuals” (Preface vii).
their mainstream moral judgment regarding murder, violence, and war. David Piwinski moves the argument even further when he writes that, “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” (196). O’Brien has previously attached Vietnam to the word evil and again we see Piwinski make the same connection between the character Wade’s exposure to evil and the amnesia he is experiencing that is surrounded by violence and loss. As readers, we move in between the narrative, footnotes, and instability of Wade’s mental state, and come to realize that multiple factors that muddy the ability to discern between fact, truth, and fiction have been equally present in the representation and conclusions we have formed regarding our moral response to the Vietnam War. We also begin to attach, rather tentatively, the ominous sense of evil from our experience of the war and subsequent wars. And not surprisingly, some of the conclusions that we may try to come to regarding the unsettled feelings that the narrative has evoked in response to the Vietnam War may be as equally filled with confusion as John Wade’s memory, and our frustrated inability to figure out what has happened to Kathy Wade. Marjorie Worthington writes that “O’Brien’s works often demonstrate that the truth is difficult to determine and can depend upon the context” (121). In order to figure out the truth we will try to put the narrator in context to our experiences. When we do this we are forced to go back and contemplate the facts, or footnotes, if you will, and we are not sure if they are more reliable than the narrative, but in conjunction with Wade’s narrative and our experiences, they begin to fill in the gaps and restore our memory in order to see clearly what we have forgotten. O’Brien is relying
on the reader to do this work. This is why he continues to provide us with multiple propositions to the fate of Kathy Wade.

If we are to subscribe to the thought that the footnotes seem more reliable, it is because O’Brien has intermingled actual historical evidence, quotes from real books and people, such as George Custer, Cervantes, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky and Woodrow Wilson. Not only does O’Brien name drop some of the most famous writers and politicians in history, he also invokes the expertise of psychologists such as Judith Herman in the well known book Trauma and Recovery. This factual evidence that O’Brien inserts motivates the reader to look for answers to Kathy’s disappearance in a more systematic, scientific way. The form works brilliantly to merge real life, with the fictional life of the narrative and as we continue sifting through the narrative and footnotes, we begin to find that we may not be any closer to the truth through the footnotes than we had been through the narration of John Wade. Marjorie Worthington notices that the hybrid “structure of In the Lake of the Woods reinforces this notion of the slippery indeterminacy of the truth” (122). This reinforcement creates a nuanced complexity that continues to force the reader into conflicting responses to the information that they are receiving through the narrative.

The complexity increases when O’Brien introduces us to material that we are familiar with in theory but never had to consider what it would require in practice. We read rules of engagement in war from The Geneva Convention part one, article 3 that says “in all circumstances [any people who lay down their arms shall] be treated humanely”

11 Even the naysayers of O’Brien’s Lake seem to understand that he is trying to do something original with the material. Jeff Giles states, “O’Brien devotes several chapters to long lists of ‘evidence’ -- artifacts, statements from friends, quotes from Chekhov and Pynchon -- that read like the notes for somebody’s doctoral thesis” (78).
(“Convention (I)…”). This rule, from a real document, will be used later in the narrative to alert the reader that following this order in real life war situations is not as simple as it may sound. The reader will be exposed to My Lai not only through Wade but O’Brien himself, when he adds his own opinion into the footnotes, “I could smell the sin. I could feel the butchery sizzling like grease just under my eyeballs” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 199). The reader is also given excerpts from Article IV of *The Nuremberg Principles* when they are reminded that “a person [who] acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law” (“Principles of Nuremberg…”). These laws seem to make sense and as civilians we hold them as shields against the horror of war. In reality, for those in the throes of war in a foreign land, these principles are not as easily followed. We can see the same principle in motion in our consideration of Sethe in *Beloved* by Morrison when we are asked to consider life through the perspective of an abused slave, but in this case we will be forced to see that it is impossible for a civilian to understand and contemplate morality from the perspective of a soldier in the midst or war.

Again, this mandate will be presented against some narrative moments when the reader will sympathize with the character that was not able to abide by this rule. O’Brien uses these real life authors, politicians, legal language and juxtaposes them to the fictitious world of John Wade in order for the reader to consider that fiction and truth are not as easily compartmentalized as we think. Placed against these ideas again is our narrator Wade who, while a part of the killings at My Lai, says, “this was not madness, Sorcerer [Wade] understood. This was sin” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 107). Wade could discern that it was wrong for “the lieutenant [to] shoot down a dozen women
and kids and reload,” again and again (O’Brien *In the Lake of the Woods* 107). He was unable however, to adhere and follow *The Geneva Convention* in the midst of the killing spree in My Lai. In a moment of clarity Wade can see the sin, but he is powerless to stop what is going on around him “and what remains in the mind from this book is an unsparing depiction of the moral and emotional nightmares of Vietnam, made more unsparing by O'Brien's rigorous refusal to write them off as the craziness of the moment” (Iyer 74). The implications are bigger than this. O’Brien refuses to take full responsibility for the atrocities and yet at the same time acknowledges that there was a moral conscience in effect. He is imploring us as a country to look squarely into our past and see the truth of the atrocity and not live under the selective amnesia that we have so cleverly created to conceal our sin. As Wade, in moment of clarity, can see the actions for the evil that it was, we as readers are asked to do the same12. Timothy Melley reveals this truth as he writes, “The result [of O’Brien’s work] is a tale whose radical ambiguity cannot help but have historical implications” (112). The historical implications that Melley so aptly points out are the culpability of personal morality. That it is immoral to not consider and respect humanity and our irresponsibility to do so has cost us dearly.

Arguments and debates have raged over responsibility concerning the horrific events and the treatment of both the civilians and the soldiers, men and women that we welcomed back to America not as heroes but as murderers. O’Brien will pull from his own personal trauma in order to reconstruct the forgotten history in order to fill in the amnesiatic gaps. The brilliance of the novel *In the Lake of the Woods* is that we will be

---

12 This is in stark contrast to our earlier treatment of Beloved. Sethe becomes a murderer in order to protect her daughter from abuse caused by the immorality of slavery. Sethe’s act becomes moral whereas Wade’s act is immoral even though it has been sanctioned by the government.
able to talk about the way this book can ask the question, “who was making the mistakes?” We know that as the images of war, and the truth contained in them, entered our bedrooms the voices of the victims (of both sides of the fighting) began to cry out for recognition. “We have been living in a political culture of disavowals. Disavowals follow from crimes for which no one is capable of claiming responsibility,” notes Charles Baxter (*Burning Down the House* 9). Although we may not find answers in this work in the typical fashion of the murder mystery novel and Kathy’s disappearance will forever be a mystery it is possible the O’Brien’s objective for the novel has been met if we consider that “…narrative art has different, perhaps higher, goals in mind: providing art’s special pleasures, that is finding beauty even in horror, and also reaching or at least approaching deeper truths, truths not about individual events but larger conditions” (Cohen 234). It is the larger conditions that O’Brien is working with, an understanding of the price of war. The reader is asked to consider that these “murderers” were soldiers in a combat zone who were trained to be killing machines and then asked to have a moral conscience when making decisions on whom to kill in a war zone. Mimicking the book, in this dilemma it seems impossible to determine who is culpable in the scenario. The ambiguity of culpability is intensified by the issue that, for the first time, Americans were seeing actual footage of what war really looked like and the overexposure was causing a backlash on the men and women who were doing what our government told them to do. The soldiers actual success at being exactly what the government trained them to do, a fighter who killed his enemies, became abhorrent to the people watching at home. These conflicting responses create a moral dilemma for both civilians and soldiers alike. One of the responses that the reader can have to the book is an understanding that it is time to claim
some responsibility; and world began doing this by asking difficult questions regarding the effort of war. Faces that had been hidden began to move out of blurred sketches in our minds and into clear, crisp pictures of broken and bruised brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, family and friends. But as Wade has lost Kathy, we find that we, as a nation, have lost an innocence that we had retained prior to Vietnam.

These Kodachrome images of war are hard to look at and they only intensify our fears that we did not know what we were fighting for. As our enemy became a person, it became harder to witness and to digest the massacres that we had seen. At the same time we were eschewing the violence against what were called our enemies, we were under orders by our government to protect the land we loved, our home. A new global awareness had come into perspective and it was requiring a new morality. In a time when there were absolutely inordinately stressful choices, we kept finding that we didn’t always make the right ones and that included our government and even President Nixon who said that there was a “desire not to know the truth in case it turned out to be unpleasant” (Baxter, *Burning Down the House 3*). It takes a brave novelist like O’Brien who is willing to ask us to confront our memories and collective amnesia in order to reconsider the moral questions surrounding a war zone. *In the Lake of the Woods* asks us to peer deep into the unanswered questions of war games and rules of engagement. As William Young notes, “Still, troubling questions persist. Do we reinvest and re-imagine our own experience at the cost to someone else’s version of events?” (135) This question may stay as unanswered as the fate of Kathy Wade but, in its contemplation we have allowed ourselves to be touched and with real life stories that could alter our limited perspective of truth? That in itself is a worthy mystery to seek answers to.


Davidson, Rob. Lecture and Notes. English 689T. California State University, Chico, Chico, CA. 2009-2010.


