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## ENG 200: On Killing

Kenneth Schlabach

Western Kentucky University, [kenneth.schlabach768@topper.wku.edu](mailto:kenneth.schlabach768@topper.wku.edu)

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Kenneth Schlabach

Dr. Peggy Otto

English 200

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### On Killing

Out of all the infinite possible topics for narrative there are a few that we hold more deeply, almost sacred, among others. One these is death but even more so death by the hand of another human being. Andre Dubus and Tim O'Brien explore this theme of killing in their short stories "*Killings*" and "*The Things They Carried.*" Though they each explore unique aspects of killing their methods share several elements notably unusual chronology, blunt diction, and an objective third person point of view. Using these literary elements the authors create a dynamic between the ethical perceptions or ethos and emotional reactions or pathos of both the reader and the characters. This dynamic forces us to confront our own position on killing and ask some difficult questions, the marks of an effective short story.

Both stories break up normal narrative chronology to position the killings near the middle of the narrative. Take for example the story of Frank's killing in "*Killings*". Even though the story begins with his funeral his actual killing comes later when we have already seen part of Matt's emotional response. O'Brien takes a slightly different approach to the same effect. While Lavender's death appears near the middle of the story the whole thing is framed as a memory rather than an actual rearrangement of chronology. These moves on the authors' parts have huge impacts on how we read the killings. This chronologically isolates the moment of the killing and draws in the reader

like a black hole deforming literary time. It condenses all the action down into an instantaneous scene that essentially forms the plot from which all other actions in the story derive their significance.

While the unusual chronology serves to isolate the killing it also gives time to establish the premise and characters. If the killing took place at the beginning we would not yet be emotionally invested. We care about Jimmy Cross because we see his love for Martha, his hopes, his fears and we sympathize. The same goes for Frank; we see his youthful naivety, how he treats Martha and is undaunted by Trout; moreover, we see him through Matt's fatherly eyes. Unfortunately, like the characters in these stories, as soon as we care we have something to lose, a fact that fully is exploited by O'Brien and Dubus.

The authors make no secret that they are cruelly exploiting the reader's human sympathy. "Killings" begins "On the August morning when Matt Fowler buried his youngest son, Frank" (Dubus, 1). Likewise the first time O'Brien mentions Lavender his description is followed by the epilogue "until he was shot in the head" (O'Brien, 367). They want us to be aware of what is coming, to remember all the while we come to know and care for the characters that this will not end well for anyone.

As if the manipulation described above were not enough the authors do not end the stories chronology with simply killing characters. They force us to watch as the remaining characters' lives are torn apart. Because of the chronological positioning this is the first time we are unsure of the outcome and so it is a surprise when Matt takes his revenge on Trout and Cross must give up his love for Martha.

The authors have broken chronology to focus the reader's attention on a single moment; now they must present that moment as powerfully as possible and so they employ diction.

Diction usually calls to mind an extensive and intricate description often tinged with allusion. The authors in these stories, however, choose blunt simple diction that slams into the reader far harder than any elegant Shakespearean drama would. These passages are in effect remarkable because they describe the climax of action so unremarkably. Take for example the description of Frank's death:

"Richard Strout shot Frank in front of the boys. They were sitting on the living room floor watching television... Strout came in the front door and shot Frank twice in the chest and once in the face with a 9 mm. Automatic" (Dubus, 4).

While the overall themes of *Killings* are debatable there is no ambiguity or less offensive interpretation of this passage. It demands attention and presents the action but never offers justification. The authors will use the conclusion of "Killings" to provide closure if not explanation but for now we see only the moment. This is important because it is how the characters in the story perceive the deaths. This perception is shown especially well by the description of the soldiers' attitudes towards Lavender's death,

"Over and over—there it is, my friend, there it is...you can't change what can't be changed, there it is, there it absolutely and positively and fucking well is" (O'Brien, 381).

While this presentation of killing is profoundly shocking the authors have their purposes. By refraining from portraying emotion they force us to come face to face with our own ideas regarding killing. The only feelings here are our own. Their objectivity is necessary for us to be able to see our own perception. The passages beg "so what?"

and so we look for an ethos response to justify the pathos the authors have created.

O'Brien alludes to this tension in an argument shortly following Lavender's death. Two soldiers have just discovered a Vietcong corpse of a teenage boy and are arguing about its significance,

"Mitchell Sanders said, there's a definite moral here... Henry Dobbins thought about it. Yeah, well, he finally said. I don't see no moral.

There it is, man" (O'Brien 375).

This is an excellent parallel of the reader's position. The moment has been presented without moral commentary leaving us to examine our own. The authors will go on to present their ideas of the moral in the conclusion of the pieces but in the moment we are as baffled as the characters.

There is another literary element that is used in both stories out of necessity to make the other two elements function well. Both stories are told in a similar third person point of view with a few significant differences. While the point of view itself does not demonstrate the themes like diction or build tension, like irregular chronology, it controls the perspective with which we view the story. The authors engineered it to control how much or little of character motive and emotion we can see.

Killings is told in the third person limited where our view is restricted to Matt. Dubus could have told this story with full omniscience but he chooses to limit us to Matt's view. This is important because he is the focus, his actions and feelings are being put on trial for the reader and so we must see all his internal conflict. Take for example the passage,

“[He] lost Frank in a way no father expected to lose his son...all the grief he had been afraid of, had backed up like a huge wave and struck him... every day in his soul he shot Richard Strout in the face” (Dubus 5).

In the end the point of view makes this not primarily a story of the deaths of two young men but of a grieving father and his internal struggle with grief.

The Things They Carried by contrast to Killings is told in the third person omniscient giving us many details about the emotional and spiritual state of all the soldiers. This is because O'Brien is trying to communicate truths of being a soldier in a war to a civilian audience and is not concerned with only a single narrative. The whole story could also have been written in a much more limited view where we would only see the physical horrors and burdens the soldiers carry, but the goal of the story is to show that the soldiers carry burdens that go far beyond the physical. O'Brien shows this when he writes,

“They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing...the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down” (O'Brien, 381).

This quote demonstrates an overarching theme; O'Brien is showing what defines the men as soldiers is carrying the fear inspired by killing.

Perhaps the most impressive common aspect of these stories is the way they successfully mesh together all three of these elements into a cohesive reading experience. They present the reader with important questions and truths regarding the terrible weight of the loss of a human life. They essentially take us through the literary

experience from a place of innocence towards killing in the context of the stories to a place of new innocence where if we do not have the answers at least the right questions. This ability to profoundly affect a reader is what makes these stories successful.