

War's Human Heart

Beauty and life. In war. In disaster. In the ordinary. Whether it is the hidden meaning in the narratives of Vietnam in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," the radiant tales of love and innocence in Svetlana Alexievich's "Voices from Chernobyl," or the elusive "aesthetic contemplation" that forms true art and beauty in Dr. Kerns' lecture "Lecture V: Aesthetic Contemplation" on the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, war is considered as the deadly beauty of human emotion.

But how can such feelings be expressed in an essay? Dr. Kerns explains that a full understanding of a sentiment, a "B-perception" or "aesthetic contemplation" that is "so overwhelming that it could almost not be described in words" — it is something to feel rather than tangibly sensed.

Both of the pieces are written with narratives. "How to Tell a True War Story" is a series of war narratives within the central, contemplative narration; "Voices from Chernobyl," although not truly about war, deals with a situation of war-like intensity through a series of stories and quotes.

And the answer is in these stories. The narratives. The personal situations bring intimacy to the words, the stories and the infinity of emotions and perceptions and complexities within every person. Specifically, the use of the narrative mode and the appeals—ethos in the action, logos in the conscience, and pathos in the imagery — are used to illustrate war as a vessel for human expression.

Consider a few of the opening sentences of "How to Tell a True War Story":

"This is true. I had a buddy in Vietnam. His name was Bob Kiley, but everybody called him Rat. A friend of his gets killed, so about a week later Rat sits down and writes a letter to the guy's sister" (O'Brien 1).

It seems like the exposition to any other story. But it's more complicated than that.

"This is true" is a simple assertion. It is the link to the present, the narration, throwing trust into the relationship between author and reader. When he introduces "... [his] buddy in Vietnam," the story is emotional and nostalgic, thrown into the ideas of friendship of "buddy" and war of "Vietnam." By giving us his nickname "Rat," the reader can feel more connected with O'Brien and his friend, building ethos once more. And then there is the logical action of writing a letter of condolences.

All of the appeals are tightly interwoven. This inseparable mass of appeals is key to the narrative mode. Like any writing, the "show" is encouraged over the "tell"; by engaging both the mind with logos and sensory organs with the regular imagery and description, one can sense with Schopenhauer's B-perception the extraordinary mixture of life and death and war through these stories. When O'Brien states that "[a true war story] does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done" (O'Brien 1), he means that they do not *superficially* tell them. As he clarifies later, the morals of true war stories "[are] like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning" (O'Brien 6). Again, emphasis on tight interweaving.

The same can be said of Alexievich's narrative. Looking back from the present and reflecting that "Everything was radiant. The whole sky. A tall flame" (Alexievich 1) and narrating from the present that "... we didn't know that then" (Alexievich 1) exemplify a simple description and a reasonable statement. The description is simple and believable, building trust with the reader; the other statement builds pity, a form a pathos, for the innocent narrator unknowing of the perils to come for her husband, her community, and her child. What is most amazing is the ability to switch back and forth between these different modes — descriptive and narrative — so seamlessly, to give a sense of Schopenhauer's B-perception that eludes our consciousness but is captured by the subconscious.

War is difficult to grasp. People fight for a cause and sometimes they die — but that is only the superficial part of it. Alexievich, for example, "was telling [the reader] about ... love" (Alexievich 5), not about war. Woven into war, just as cleverly and tightly as the rhetorical appeals are woven into the same story, O'Brien and Alexievich subtly demonstrate — in that B-cognition manner — that emotion is the beautiful side to war. That war is about what happens inside a person as well as outside.

Works Cited

Alexievich, Svetlana. "Voices from Chernobyl."

Kerns, Tom. "Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* Lecture V: Aesthetic Contemplation."

O'Brien, Tim. "How to Tell a True War Story."