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Assignment #1

Subjectivity in "The Things They Carried"

Death is inevitable; experts have tried for years to explain the best way to grieve or come to terms with death. The Kubler-Ross Model is one of these theories, and is characterized by its five steps in which a person grieves: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. For war veterans however, the way to grieve might not be completely clear cut. In the chapter "In the Field" in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's characters defy the five steps of grieving set forth by the Kubler-Ross Model to show that subjectivity reigns supreme, even when dealing with death.

The Kubler-Ross Model was created by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in 1969. In her model, she explains that all humans go through five steps in the process of grieving. The first step, denial, states that the person grieving believes he is fine, when he really is not; the feeling is temporary and the person becomes very aware of personal possessions and individuals that are left behind. The next step, anger, is when the person becomes just that, angry and full of rage. Next is bargaining, in which the person tries to justify the death, followed by depression, the person disconnects from those around him. The final step, acceptance, is when the person comes to term with the situation.

For the characters in the chapter "In the Field," the five steps in the model are turned upside down when they deal with Kiowa's death. The characters who follow the model the most are Azar, Norman Bowker, and Mitchell Sanders. These men, although Kiowa's friends and fellow soldiers, were not directly involved with his death. Azar's blatant joking and then future realization shows the characteristics with the denial and bargaining steps. He says that Kiowa's death is "classic" and makes a pun saying Kiowa's drowning in mud is "biting the dirt" (122). However, after finding Kiowa's body, Azar states that the death is "no joke" (126). His bargaining appears when he tells Norman, "if I'd kept my mouth shut none of it would've ever happened" (128). Azar makes the justification for his behavior and how it might have killed Kiowa. Norman Bowker and Mitchell Sanders both have anger, Norman towards Azar's disrespect and Mitchell towards Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's involvement and seeming nonchalance. But Norman displays acceptance as he tells Azar that in a way, Kiowa's death was "nobody's fault," but in another way was "everybody's" (128). He understands that in war, there is no clear person to blame for death. These characters, although they face one to two steps of the Kubler-Ross Model in order, they still skip steps, showing that even the way a person grieves is subjective.

The young soldier and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross do not follow the Kubler-Ross Model with their grieving. They skip steps and backtrack to others. The young soldier first experiences denial, as he searches through the water for his girlfriend's picture. He is obsessed with finding the reason he believed caused the fired mortars. At the same time, he faces depression, stating that because he lost Kiowa and the picture, he wonders "if he could lose himself" (125). The young soldier does not see any reason to be alive and feels complete guilt. This leads to his bargaining, as he believes that if he had not turned on his flashlight, Kiowa would still be alive. Lieutenant Cross starts off by feeling complete blame, bargaining that if he had chosen a different spot to set up camp, defying orders, Kiowa would still be alive. Later, Cross faces denial, not wanting to put the blame on himself but on "one of those freak things" that happens in war (128). Although this may not be completely unbelievable, for Cross, it is a denying aspect, as he does feel responsible for the lives of his men, and here he goes against that belief. After he denies Kiowa's death, he remembers his role in Kiowa's death, and he "let himself go deeper into the waste, just letting the field take him" (129). He withdraws himself from his men, and as he sinks deeper into the waste, he sinks deep into the depression step.

These characters' disregard for the five steps of grieving shows off the postmodernist belief of subjectivity. O'Brien shows throughout this chapter that grief is not objective. Everyone grieves in different ways, especially when war is involved, because it makes grieving harder and more confusing.

Discussion Questions:

1. What would a postmodernist think about the Kubler-Ross Model?
2. What do the characters' reactions to Kiowa's death tell us about why grieving is subjective?