

The Emancipation of Mary Anne:

Using Sylvia Plath's Poetry to Explore Tim O'Brien's "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

By Heather Lambert

Tim O'Brien's famous novel *The Things They Carried* is a largely male-centred collection of stories that surround tales of the love and trauma experienced by American soldiers in Vietnam. The hyper-masculinity of the characters is made evident through their constant fear of shame or appearing cowardly, even when many of them are only fresh out of high school. This hyper-masculinity complex also manifests in how the male characters think about or behave towards the few women of the novel, as they often characterize them into the stereotypical boxes of sex object, innocent virgin, or mother figure. One woman that they are forced into close quarters with is Mary Anne Bell, the girlfriend of Mark Fossie who is flown in from America. As her last name suggests, she represents the belle of Vietnam to the male soldiers, and is often only described in terms of her "terrific legs" and blonde hair (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 90). But much to their surprise, by the end of the chapter Mary Anne exposes her primal nature, and she eventually escapes into the jungle forever. This conclusion, when placed in dialogue with Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," reveals "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" as a feminist tale. More specifically, Mary Anne's external performance of feminine roles—such as silence and innocence—leads the men to underestimate her, allowing her to eventually gain freedom through an internal embrace of her body and spirit. This emancipation results in a disruption of the socially constructed man-as-primal and woman-as-virginal binary, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how war can overturn conceptions of gender.

Before we can begin a close reading of these texts, it is imperative to address Plath's poetry and her relation to feminism. The poem we will be discussing, "Lady Lazarus," follows a

woman as she performs her “death” for the third time in her life, only to be reborn again by her end and “eat men like air” (Plath 84). This poem, like most of her others in *Ariel*, invoke feminist concepts by illuminating womanly struggles, such as the repression of the self or one’s voice in order to fit into a prescribed, gendered box. That being said, many scholars have argued that Plath’s texts cannot be read through a feminist lens, since she died before second wave feminism was an established concept. One such scholar is Roberta Mazzanti, who argues, “Because . . . Plath’s work was being read by people other than her intended audience, by readers searching for political [feminist] sustenance, some distortion in her achievement is bound to occur” (qtd. in Tripp 254). Such a perspective is problematic for multiple reasons, the first being the assumption that feminist thought has a specific date or cultural marker and did not exist in any form during Plath’s lifetime—as if it magically appeared one day without any prior contemplation. Also, Anna Tripp explains that “from this point of view, a reading can discover only what the author knew,” which is an unnecessary limitation akin to the intentional fallacy (253). Plath’s poems are therefore capable of revealing feminist imagery and themes, making “Lady Lazarus” a beneficial companion to O’Brien’s story of a woman made free during roughly the same time period.

In fact, “Lady Lazarus” contains similar bodily metaphors to O’Brien’s story, such as a concentration on the tongue and speech, and an association between women and the animal or the spirit. This association is especially notable in terms of the cat imagery laced throughout both texts. In “Lady Lazarus,” Plath explicitly refers to herself as a “cat” because she has “nine times to die” (21). Similarly, Eddie Diamond calls Mary Anne “a real tiger” as he observes her coy yet mysterious nature (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 92). The connections do not stop there: later, when Mary Anne is transitioning into her more primal self, “a short screeching sound, like a cat” is heard from within the Greenies’ tent when Mark breaks down the door (O’Brien, *Things They*

Carried 104). Mary Anne also surrounds herself with cats, such as the “decayed head of a large black leopard,” in the same way that Plath fills her poetry collection with feline imagery in association with dangerous women (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 105). By the end of both texts, Plath and Mary Anne seem to vanish with the stealth of a cat, creating an ever-mysterious and predatory presence that extends beyond the pages of their stories. By further exploring how these texts commingle through their metaphors of the tongue and the spirit, we may better understand how “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” acknowledges the blindness inherent in gender stereotyping.

THE MOUTH, CONSUMPTION, AND SILENCE

To begin, the emphasis on the mouth, the voice, and eating in “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” highlights Mary Anne’s journey from consumable to consumer in her relationship with the men. When Mary Anne first arrives, the men gaze at her appearance, concentrating on her “long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream”—it is only an afterthought that she is “very friendly, too” with “a happy smile” (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 89, 91). This comparison of her skin to ice cream is the first indicator that she is nothing but a consumable to them: a treat that has arrived for their pleasure. In “Lady Lazarus,” the narrator similarly describes herself as a “smiling woman,” even though she is about to perform her death (Plath 19). This connection indicates that Mary Anne’s smile may have been a performance from the beginning—a way of performing her passive femininity in order to conceal her Freudian id-like curiosity for Vietnam. After all, it is hard to believe that she would put herself in a place of war for the sole reason of seeing her high school sweetheart.

Mary Anne's connection to Vietnam is further proven by the "new confidence in her voice" after she stays a while and learns more about the land (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 94). Her growing voice becomes intimidating for Mark, so he suggests that she should go home, and eventually proposes marriage in order to silence her and keep her in her place as the consumable, not the consumer. But Mary Anne's silence does not necessarily indicate her submission. As seen in "Lady Lazarus," the narrator states, "And there is a charge, a very large charge / For a word or a touch" (Plath 61-62). In this way, Mary Anne's voice is of high value, and her choice to temporarily remain silent can just as well be seen as a punishment against him, for which he must be "charged." In silencing Mary Anne, Mark got what he asked for: he never has to hear from her again. While she could have vocalized her true feelings to him, she chose to keep silent—a strategy that allowed her to later slip away quietly instead.

When Mary Anne returns, her tongue is ready to taste, instead of being tasted. Her necklace of human tongues—one of the most visceral images of the novel—is a notable symbol of her transformation (O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 105). While she is previously described in terms of taste, she has now removed others' means of tasting her, thereby gaining control of what originally controlled her. Mary Anne's tongues also symbolize her reclaiming of her voice since Mark's attempt to silence her. In fact, Mary Anne's voice is even louder than before, as she has many tongues with which to speak her truth. It is therefore not the repulsive image of her removal of tongues that horrifies Mark, but rather the idea that Mary Anne's "foreign tongue" has multiplied and come back stronger than ever (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 103). Likewise, Plath's narrator in "Lady Lazarus" recognizes the terror of a woman with a working mouth when she asks, "Do I terrify?— / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?" (12-13). This acknowledgement of women's teeth shifts the focus to Mary Anne's developed appetite by the

end of the chapter. Mary Anne tells Mark, “I want to eat this place,” confessing “an appetite so large she could ‘swallow the whole country’”—another aspect not characteristic of a small, meek (ideal) woman (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 106; Smiley 605). In the world of this novel, an “uncontained woman's appetite = chaos,” especially for the men who have relied on these gender stereotypes for so long, as it forces them to recognize the reality outside of their original perception (Smiley 605). And if they do not recognize Mary Anne’s power, the final line of the story gives them a warning: “She was ready for the kill” (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 110). Mary Anne has become the predator, no longer the prey—the consumer, no longer the consumed. This conclusion also rings true in the final line of “Lady Lazarus,” where the narrator warns, “I eat men like air.” (Plath 84). In a way, Mary Anne has already eaten them: she becomes synonymous with the land, and as long as the men remain there, they also cannot escape the fact that they are inside her, in a much more encompassing way than they originally wanted to consume her.

THE BODY AND THE SPIRIT

Mary Anne’s growing animalistic connection to her body also represents her eventual spiritual freedom, which allows her to transcend the men’s attempts to constrain her. Mary Anne’s shift begins when Rat Kiley notes that “hygiene became a matter of small consequence” for her after she stops wearing makeup or jewellery (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 94). This small move away from the traditionally feminine concerns of cleanliness and beauty marks Mary Anne’s simultaneous embrace and rejection of her female body. That is, when she fully embraces her natural bodily functions, it leads to both her rejection of restrictive feminine norms, and

eventually a rejection of the limitations of her bodily form altogether, as will be made evident later.

Mark recognizes this change in Mary Anne's relationship to her body, as he notes, "Her body seemed foreign" (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 94). Mark's description of her body as "foreign" is especially important given the fact that the soldiers are on foreign land—for Mark, Mary Anne represented an unchangeable symbol from back home, but now she has also become a part of the foreignness of Vietnam. Mark's struggle also comes from the fact that Mary Anne's more androgynous appearance makes it hard for him to understand her, as she can no longer be placed in a gendered box. But despite Mark's belief that Mary Anne has drastically changed, in "Lady Lazarus," Plath writes, "I may be skin and bone, / Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman." (33-34). Similarly to how Plath's narrator claims that in death she is still the same woman, in the case of Mary Anne and the 'death' of her previous relationship with her body, there is the implication that she was always primal, and was only hiding it under the guise of gender performance.

Either way, Mark attempts to 'civilize' Mary Anne with another social construction: marriage. His method works for a short period of time: she is described as "freshly shampooed" and wearing "a white blouse, a navy blue skirt, and a pair of plain black flats" at the dinner table (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 98). But it is shortly after this moment that she disappears with the Greenies, and when she returns, her rebirth has been solidified. Mary Anne explains to Mark her "awakening in terms of appetite and carnal excitement, of being absolutely in the body" for the first time since she left for the Greenies: "When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm on fire almost" (Smiley 604; O'Brien, *Things They*

Carried 106). This closeness to the body and the physical world is mirrored in “Lady Lazarus,” where Plath writes, “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. . . . I do it so it feels real.” (43-44, 47). Even more notable is the fact that Mary Anne describes feeling like she is “on fire,” much like how the phoenix in “Lady Lazarus” bursts into flame in order to be reborn in the ashes. Mary Anne’s rebirth is therefore a way for her to be more in touch with her real self, both bodily and spiritually.

Mary Anne’s soul manifests within this tale as well, as seen when Rat describes her as a “small, soft shadow,” and also a “spirit” that “seemed to float across the surface of the earth” (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 101). In this passage Mary Anne is characterized as distinctly without a body, and therefore without earthly limitations—she is like a ghost, as reflective of her ‘death’ and rebirth. Similarly to how Plath’s poetry has been characterized as “a poetry of struggle and survival,” Mary Anne’s rebirth into a more spiritual form acts as her method of survival as a woman who has been consumed and restricted into the boundaries of constructed womanhood (Tripp 254). Mary Anne-as-spirit also reflects O’Brien’s description of characters and storytelling in “The Magic Show”: “In the ordinary sense, there *is* no Huck Finn, and yet in the extraordinary sense, which is the sense of magic, there most certainly *is* a Huck Finn and always will be” (176). In the same way, there both *is* and *is not* Mary Anne, but her physical, literal existence does not matter in either the world of the reader or the world of the soldiers—she is a spirit. When Mary Anne “vanishes” into the jungle in the same way the Greenies are said to “vanish” and later “magically reappear,” she leaves a haunting presence that surpasses ‘reality,’ as it does not matter whether she is alive or dead, real or not real—her spirit is there, and it is watching (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 88, 110).

MAN-AS-PRIMAL VERSUS WOMAN-AS-VIRGINAL

Both images of the tongue/speech and the body/spirit reinforce that O'Brien's text serves to disrupt gender binaries, especially with regards to the man-as-primal and woman-as-virgin stereotype. O'Brien's male characters vocalize their process of attempting to understand Mary Anne's change by first emphasizing this dichotomy, only to eventually learn that it does not apply and therefore needs to be dismantled. O'Brien hints at this outcome at the start of the chapter, when Rat calls attention to Mary Anne's culottes—the perfect clothing piece to illustrate a combination of masculine and feminine construction, and therefore Mary Anne's function as a disruption of that binary (*Things They Carried* 86). Despite this, the men begin by describing Mary Anne as “perky and fresh-faced” and the picture of innocence, to which Eddie Diamond states, “The girl will most definitely learn” (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 92). Not only does this statement display Eddie's attempt to force Mary Anne into his conception of a pure, innocent woman who needs to be taught a lesson, but it also invokes a question: is Mary Anne unafraid because she is ignorant or innocent, or because she is where she belongs? After all, by the end of the story it is the men who learn, as Mary Anne explains how they are they ones who are “in a place where [they] don't belong” (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 106). Nevertheless, the men persist at the beginning in seeing her as purely innocent.

Later, when Mary Anne goes missing for the first time, Mark frantically states his fear that “she's sleeping with somebody” (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 95). This statement reveals two facts about Mark's understanding of Mary Anne: first, his worst fear is not the fact that she is missing or could be dead, but rather that she is unfaithful and, maybe worse, not sexually innocent. The second is that he clearly underestimates what she is capable of when she is free, as the only thing he can conceive of her doing is to have sex with someone else. This obsession

with Mary Anne's virginity continues when Rat assures readers that "she wasn't sleeping with any of them" but "in a way she was sleeping with *all* of them, ... except it wasn't sex or anything" (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 97). Why does Rat feel the need to preserve this one small characteristic of Mary Anne's identity? It is possible that this is another result of the men's insistence on maintaining the insidious gender binary, but it is notable that this is a moment where their minds begin to change. Later in the story, when Rat compares the men's sightings of Mary Anne to other crazy stories they heard, such as when "some guy comes back from the bush, tells you he saw the Virgin Mary out there," and he states, "This Mary Anne was no virgin but at least she was real" (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 102). This contrast between the Virgin Mary and Mary Anne contradicts Rat's previous insistence on Mary Anne's virginity. But does he mean to say that Mary Anne has been sexually active, or that she is not a virgin in the sense that she is not generally as pure or innocent as they previously believed? In this line, her sexuality is made complicated, making her both intimidating and difficult for the men to consume.

This causes a noticeable shift in how the men characterize and behave towards her. Rat's rant in the middle of the story is a prime example of how the men change their minds about not just Mary Anne, but women in general: "You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 102). The men appear to realize their mistake in assuming and preserving the strict gender binary of man-as-primal and woman-as-virgin/innocent. Mary Anne pushes this concept even further in how she is "less persuasive as an argument that 'women do these [horrible] things [that men do], too' than she is as an example of 'those of us who have done these things are still

human; given the situation you'd have done the same” (Smiley 606). Mary Anne therefore represents less of a ‘women are men, too’ argument and more of a ‘we are all just human’ perspective. At the beginning, the men only saw Mary Anne in terms of how she “made you think about those girls back home, how pure and innocent they all are” (O’Brien, *Things They Carried* 108). But by the end, they come to realize that “women who never go to war are not innocent so much as they are ignorant of their own capacity for violence,” along with their potential for freedom from gender constraints (Smiley 604).

CONCLUSION

In O’Brien’s tale “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” Mary Anne serves as a symbol for how instances of social chaos, such as a war, can disrupt limiting social constructions and binaries, such as that of gender. As seen through a comparison to Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” by reviving her tongue and voice and embracing her natural body—and therefore becoming free of it—Mary Anne exemplifies how a woman can be both innocent and sexual, woman and man, restrained and free. In “The Magic Show,” O’Brien writes, “Story telling involves the conjuring up of spirits . . . and those spirits, in turn, make implicit moral claims on us, serving as models of a sort, suggesting by implication how we might or might not lead our own lives” (177-78). Mary Anne, then, serves to claim that gender stereotypes damage male-female relationships, to the point where a woman must escape into the jungle while wearing a necklace of tongues in order to be taken seriously, and, more importantly, to be free. As Pamela Smiley argues, “Mary Ann [sic] illustrates not just the release war brings, but also how women . . . are ‘freed’ when they travel outside of their culture and its definitions of what it means to be a woman” (605). Both Mary Anne-as-character and Sylvia Plath-as-writer represent a complex intermingling of the

mythical, transcendent figure and the historical, physical woman, which allows both of them to 'ghost' themselves and vanish into a literary dimension beyond the physical world outside of their texts. This act of 'ghosting' is essentially their spiritual awakening, so that they may transcend the seemingly stagnant male characters. What makes Mary Anne and Sylvia Plath's spirits so haunting is not the fact that they are "ready for the kill," but rather the threats they pose to traditional gender norms and their lasting presence in the post-Vietnam era (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 110).

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. "The Magic Show." *Writers on Writing*, edited by Robert Pack and Jay Parini, Middlebury College Press, 1991, 175-183.

---. *The Things They Carried*. Mariner Books: 1990.

Plath, Sylvia. "Lady Lazarus." *Ariel*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2004, 14-17.

Smiley, Pamela. "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried': Why Should Real Women Play?" *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2002, 602-613. Accessed 04 December 2017.

Tripp, Anna. "Saying 'I': Sylvia Plath as Tragic Author or Feminist Text." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2008, pp. 253-263. Accessed 04 December 2017.