

In the Lake of the Woods Creative Writing Assignments

“That’s what fiction is for. It’s for getting at the truth when the truth isn’t sufficient for the truth.”

~ Tim O’Brien

In his novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, Tim O’Brien uses four different chapter types to provide his readers with a multi-dimensional view of the main character John Wade. The “question” chapters focus on what might have occurred in the days *immediately following* Kathy’s disappearance. The “hypothesis” chapters deal with what might have happened to Kathy *when* she disappeared. The “evidence” chapters provide seemingly factual information and “expert” testimony about John Wade’s state of mind. And the “nature of…” chapters provide glimpses into the main character’s past.

Hypothesis Pastiche

In his novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, Tim O’Brien explores the nature of truth. By creating a character who is the “purest puzzle” and developing a mystery with no solution, O’Brien entices us to seek truth and then, in the end, challenges us to reflect on and question our assumptions. One way in which he does this is through his “Hypothesis” chapters.

Consider the quotation above and your reading of “How to Tell a True War Story.” What do you think O’Brien wants to convey to his readers about the nature of truth? Review several “Hypothesis” chapters, paying special attention to both the content and the style. How does O’Brien “set up” the information he provides? How does he manipulate the reader into making certain assumptions which he later refutes?

After considering these questions, write your own “hypothesis.” Since this is a creative pastiche, make sure you emulate O’Brien’s style. Consider narrative voice, stylistic features, appropriate content and structure.

The Nature of the Word

While each type of chapter is important to the text as a whole, the “nature of…” chapters perhaps provide us with the most insight into who John Wade really is and what motivates him. They supply us with information, for example, about John’s relationship with his father, his seemingly dysfunctional marriage to Kathy, and his traumatic experiences in Vietnam, all of which help us to understand his behavior in the “present”.

As a way for you to explore this complex character more deeply, you are going to be creating your own “Nature of…” chapter. Begin by reading the following quotations from the novel:

“‘Thing is, he doesn’t care much for losing.’ He leaned back heavily in his chair. ‘Like with his hobby. The man yanks a rabbit out of a hat, you don’t yell cheater, do you? You *know* it’s a trick. It’s *supposed* to be a trick. All you do is clap like crazy… Same with politics. Bunch of tricksters, they’re all making moves.’ He paused and grinned at her. ‘Dirty isn’t operative. **Nature of the show**’” (228).

“Vinny’s fingers twitched. The thought came to Wade’s mind that the two of them shared some intuitive understanding about the **nature of the human animal**. Things that were possible, things that were not” (241).

In the Lake of the Woods Creative Writing Assignments

Consider the two phrases in boldface: “Nature of the show” of “nature of the human animal.” What does each phrase suggest to you? What *is* the “nature of the show” in the context of *In the Lake of the Woods*? What *is* the “nature of the human animal”? Now, imagine that Tim O’Brien had included in his novel a chapter entitled “The Nature of the Show” or “The Nature of the Human Animal.”

Select one of these two phrases and write the chapter that O’Brien might have written had he chosen to do so. What would such a chapter contain? What might it reveal about John Wade’s character? How would it further our understanding of John Wade’s state of mind and his behavior?

Review the “Nature of...” chapters in the novel, paying special attention to O’Brien’s technique. Think about the narrative voice he develops, the ideas he explores, and the stylistic features he uses to create meaning. Consider ways to incorporate all of these into your own piece.