

On the Rainy River

(On an individual's capacity for self-sacrifice in the face of compelling circumstances.)

In the short story *On the Rainy River* by Tim O'brien, the author develops the idea that when faced with compelling circumstances, an individual may go lengths to self-sacrifice in order to escape or embrace those circumstances. This idea is introduced in the very beginning, as the reader follows the day to day life of a young Tim, working small jobs here and there and living paycheck to paycheck. After graduating from college, Tim is requested to join a drafting team for the Vietnam war, but is hesitant as he does not agree with nor understand the motives of the war. He believes he is too good to fight in the war and blames the townspeople for standing behind something they don't fully understand. This false sense of moral superiority however, leads him to nothing but confusion, as he is faced with two possibilities that could potentially change his life forever. He can stay in America and join the war as asked of him, or he can gather his belongings and go to Canada. It is with no doubt that Tim's desire to escape the war is far greater than that to stay, but it is his fear and shame that keep him from acting quickly. He faces societal pressure from his hometown and fears any judgment that may be made towards him if he escapes. On the other hand, he also fears the idea of exile if he does decide to flee to Canada. He faces what he refers to as a moral paralysis as he could not get himself to do anything he wanted to do, such as going to Canada.

After confronting his moral split, Tim finally ruptures out of fear and his courage leaks out. He makes a decision to head north towards the Rainy River, which is in between the two countries, separating Minnesota from Canada. There in the middle of the river, he finds the Tip Top lodge, a fishing resort that serves as a place where he is able to make his own decisions, free from pressure and judgement. At the Tip Top lodge, Tim also meets the lodge's proprietor, Elroy Berndal, an elderly man who has a vital influence on how the rest of Tim's journey plays out. After being openly welcomed with no questions by Elroy, the two spend the next six days together, keeping each other company, taking walks, and listening to records. Tim is overwhelmed by Elroy's understanding and acceptance of his situation, and is thankful for the old man's unquestioning charity, and providing him with a safe place to make his own decisions, free of judgement. Tim continues to face a moral contradiction as this war goes against his morals, but shame causes him to adhere to the expectations placed upon him by the society he lives in. He tries to justify his supposed moral superiority by projecting everything that he feels, as his previous lifestyle was surrounded by things of stereotypically American identities and he holds all of them responsible for placing him in such a position. Elroy Berndhal stands vigil as Tim makes his own decisions and he serves as a watchful presence rather than a direct influence on these decisions. He gives Tim two-hundred dollars as he subtly suggests that he is aware of Tim's situation.

On Tim's last full day at the Tip Top Lodge, Elroy takes him fishing on the Rainy River. While there, it occurs to Tim that their boat is very near Canadian territory and he

stares at the shoreline of Canada ahead of him, wondering what to do. The water also serves as another symbol, signifying the stripping away and cleansing of his identity. Tim bursts into tears as he wants to adhere to his own principles and his own conscience but lacks the courage to do it. He is ashamed of doing the right thing because of fear and pressure from society. Tim silently concludes that he will go to war because he is embarrassed not to. Elroy turns the boat back toward Minnesota and the next morning, Tim washes the dishes, leaves the money Elroy had provided on the kitchen counter, and drives south back to his home. Tim fails to remain grounded in his personal beliefs against the war and instead convinces himself to meet social obligations. “I would not do what I should do. I would not be brave” Now in his adulthood, Tim reflects back on how he gave into the power of shame, and how he consciously surrendered and submitted himself by going off to the very war he so strongly believed went against his morals. Tim fully acknowledges that he was “a coward”, a full declaration of his true identity that he tried for so long to mask by putting up a facade.