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Reflections of the Self and Memory in the Short Stories of Tobias Wolff

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Abstract:

We find meaning in our own experiences through our personal encounters with people, places and the environment around us. This meaning making introduces us to another significant aspect of human existence. We are essentially storytelling animals. We understand ourselves better through the narratives that we compose not only about ourselves but also about the world as a whole. Storytelling, then—fictional or nonfictional, realistic or embellished with dragons—is a way of making sense of the world around us. It becomes imperative to accept the fact that we cannot experience life in vacuum and isolation. All our actions, decisions and perspectives are guided by the intricate relationship we share with others. In telling the story of how we became who we are, and of who we're on our way to becoming, the story itself becomes a part of who we are. Life stories do not simply reflect personality. They are personality, or more accurately, they are important parts of personality, along with other parts, like dispositional traits, goals, and values. The paper aims to explore the relationship between self and memory in the fictional narratives of Tobias Wolff, an American short story writer and memoirist.

Keywords: Self, Memory, Fiction, Narratives, Autobiographical Memory.

Literature in its broadest sense is a reflection of life. It is a representation of human emotions, their experiences, their values and their daily lives. There is a general agreement that even if, literary texts attempt to represent reality in some form or another, they are ultimately the products of a writer's imagination and that at least the characters and their conversations are fictitious. Fictional narratives are the products of what an author sees, reads, touches and feels. The author has a life of his own. He sees things, meets people, does things, and experiences. When he tries to give shape to his observations and experiences, he imagines and eventually

creates. This is when the memory of his experience comes into play. His memories shape his feelings. They not only shape his stories but also the characters in his stories. He passes on his own memories to his characters. The characters develop, learn and see things through the eyes of the author. The author's self is no more his own self rather his characters. When it comes to the stories, the author presents his self through his characters.

There is an undeniably strong link between narrative and memory. They both describe the ways an individual represents a version of the past in the present, often for the purpose of shaping a desired future. There is a regular tendency with most of us to use memory and remembering interchangeably, but the fact is, remembering is the description of the act of using language to represent the past, the technique frequently adopted by fiction writers. Fiction is not strictly based on history or facts; it consists of people, experiences, and events and places. Similarly, a narrative or a story whether fictional and non-fictional is typically understood as a representation, or a construction, based on a sequence of events in the past, that communicates something from memory of the narrator.

This attests the fact that our experiences play a significant role in our understanding of our own self. It is clear that our experiences which are presented as stories are constructed through the agency of memory and imagination. These narratives use the episodic memory—the memory of a specific personal event or a sequence of events in retrieving the past self, the younger version of the self. Memory acquires a special place in our lives. It is a self-reflective tool. It gives us the advantage of introspecting deeply into our own selves. Through the use of this memory tool, we try to retrieve our past self, the younger version of present person, the person who we are now. Although it doesn't prove effective in correcting past mistakes but helps establish a sense of completeness.

My paper attempts to understand this intricate relationship between self and memory in the fictional narratives of Tobias Wolff. The paper also argues that the author uses his memory, as a tool of self-reflection. The author's life and his experiences definitely reflect themselves through his characters, which are the creation of his own imagination. The imagination deep down is a kind of memory play. It is the storehouse of information. This information is altered and modified to give a proper story. Fiction or story writing is a recollection of our experiences. It is the author's self which is represented through the various characters. Memory is an integral

aspect of fiction writing. Memory works at two levels in the narratives of Tobias Wolff. The first, Wolff's own memories of his past experiences shape the characters and the plot of his stories. Secondly, many of the characters reflect upon their own past to search for meaning in life. He deliberately presents his characters as independent individuals struggling in their lives and responsible for their own actions. Most of his stories don't have definite ends. The readers are roped in to make out meaning. As a matter of fact, Wolff's own life has been full of ups and downs and lot of struggle. Most of his stories are categorized as fictional works but there is an underlying autobiographical undercurrent in all these stories.

Tobias Wolff is an American author. He is best known for his memoirs, particularly *This Boy's Life* (1989), and his short stories. He has also written two novels. His first short story collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981) was well received and several of its stories have since reappeared in a number of anthologies. Wolff's novella, *The Barracks Thief* (1984) won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for 1985. Several of the stories of his second short story collection, *Back in the World* (1985) such as "The Missing Person," are significantly longer than the stories in his first collection. He has chronicled his early life in two memoirs. *This Boy's Life* (1989) concerns itself with the author's adolescence in Seattle. The memoir describes the nomadic and uncertain life, Wolff and his mother experienced after the divorce of Wolff's parents and then his mother's subsequent marriage to an abusive husband and stepfather. *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994) records Wolff's U.S. Army tour of duty in Vietnam. Subsequently, his third collection of stories, *The Night in Question* (1997) and *Our Story Begins* (2008), a collection of new and previously-published stories appeared. Whether he is writing fiction or non-fiction, Wolff's prose is characterized by an exploration of personal, biographical and existential terrain. Wyatt Mason has rightly remarked in the *London Review of Books*, that his protagonists face an acute moral dilemma, and are unable to reconcile what they know to be true with what they feel to be true. Indeed duplicity is Wolff's characters great failing and a recurrent theme in his works. Much of Wolff's fiction is built from reworked recollections, and his memoirs are embellished or edited versions of his personal history. In an interview given to *Contemporary Authors'* Jean W. Ross, Wolff has explained, "All of my stories are in one way or another autobiographical. Sometimes they're autobiographical in the actual events which they describe, sometimes more in their depiction of a particular character. In fact, you could say that all of my characters are reflections of my own self."

The present paper explores the relationship between the author's self and the relevance of his memory in the creation of fictional narratives analyzing select stories from Wolff's short story collection *Back in the World* (1985). "Coming Attractions" is the story of a fifteen-year-old girl working alone late at night in a movie theater, waiting for her boss Mr. Munson so she can go home. With feelings of abandonment and loneliness, she pulls up the telephone makes three calls. First, she calls her father's number but instead of her divorced father, she gets his second-wife, her stepmother. This goes nowhere, as she has no interest in talking to the girlfriend, and also has no plausible explanation for why she's calling them at midnight. Next, she calls a random stranger whom she names Mr. Love. It's a prank call where she pretends that Mr. Love has been picked at random for some prize, but eventually she gets bored and can't sustain it. Instead, she tries to make confessions about her stealing, shoplifting and sexual encounters. When she ultimately goes back home, she tries to do a small kindness for her little brother Tucker. No doubt she shows a generous side of her, she still remains sadly alone. The character of Jean has close resemblance to the teenage life of Tobias Wolff. As a teenager, Wolff also used to make prank calls, steal and shoplift. These events are also mentioned in the memoir *This Boy's Life*. "The Missing Person" is the story of Father Leo who is an undervalued. He accompanies Jerry, the convent's fundraising director to Las Vegas. Much of the story takes place on this trip to Las Vegas. While there, Jerry gambles away the congregation's money and then goes missing. Father Leo, the protagonist, feels betrayed at this act of Jerry but does not stop being kind to the needy people, the demand of his profession. In Las Vegas, he meets a sunburned, lonely and fearful woman. He cares for her and continues to live the mystery of his vocation. Wolff's own version of living the American Dream is conceptualized through the interesting character Jerry, a risk-taking chap, ready to face the challenges posed by life. "Say Yes" is the story of an unnamed husband and his wife, set off with a marital argument. On the surface, the argument is about the rightness or wrongness of interracial relationships and marriages, but pretty clearly, they're at a point in their marriage where they push each other's buttons all too easily. The story is narrated from the perspective of the husband who is arrogant in his complacency and self-assuredness. He believes that he is more intelligent and more confident than his wife Ann and therefore behaves in a manipulative manner. This story seems to have borrowed the idea of a troubled marriage from Wolff's own life, the difficult relationships his mother had with different men. "The Poor Are Always with Us" borrows its title from the

New Testament. It has moral tone and lays emphasis on the duties of the able towards the less privileged. The story is about Russell, a Silicon Valley whiz kid who wins two cars on a two utterly irrational bets with an unstable former computer engineer named Dave. The action of the story takes place at Bruno's garage where Russell has come with his Porsche car for repair. There he meets Dave, once a Silicon Valley computer genius who has run out of ideas while still being a young man. Dave and his African-American companion Groves are lambasting an acquaintance who has been fired for selling technology to the Japanese when Russell intervenes saying "I think they should lock him up and throw away the key. He sold out the people who worked with him and trusted him. He sold out his team. As far as I'm concerned, he's a complete write-off." (*Back in the World*, 65) Since Russell had followed the case, he had such strong opinions about it. This fuels anger and hatred in Dave towards Russell. Dave enquires about Russell's age. When he says that he is twenty-two, Dave annoyingly says, "Well then, I guess you know it all, from the lofty perspective of your twenty-two years." (65) Russell accepts the fact that he doesn't know it all but "knows the difference between right and wrong though." (65) When the verbal exchanges become uncontrollable, Groves tries to mediate between the two but it continues until in a moment of foolishness, Dave bets his car against Russell's over the identity of a singer on the radio, and he loses. "Soldier's Joy" deals with the reintroduction of a Vietnam War veteran into the American society. It is the story that most fits the title of Wolff's short story collection *Back in the World* (1985) which means the States and safety for the American soldiers in Vietnam. The phrase resides at the core of the story. Hooper, a veteran of Vietnam, now serving stateside reveals the mental condition and the dilemma of a soldier re-entering civilian life. Another important story, "Desert Breakdown, 1968" is a story of failure and lack of truly healthy human relationships. It observes the disparity between the realities and dreams of a young married couple, Mark and Krystal. The action of the story starts when their car breaks down in the desert. The breakdown exposes both of them to the enticing and erotic lives of others and thereby compelling them to abandoning their family and immersing themselves in the pleasure of self-gratification. In this adventure of self-gratification both Mark and Krystal evade from their duty and responsibility. Wolff uses a dual-character point of view to narrate the story giving the readers a chance to look at the perspectives of both Mark and Krystal respectively. The entire narrative is split into two parallel screens, one observing and showing the attitude of Mark towards life and the other portraying the mindset of Krystal. In "Our Story Begins",

Charlie, an aspiring writer is caught up in a meaningless job of a busboy. Framed traditionally, Charlie's story contains another story narrated by George, who looked like a young professor with "rimless spectacles, turtleneck sweater, and the ghost of a smile always on his lips." (158) This story offers the reader, Wolff's thoughts on the subject matter and intent of realistic fiction. Through Charlie's experience Wolff tells the readers how a narrative is influenced by real life incidents and people.

From the life and narratives of Tobias Wolff, it can be safely assumed that we find meaning in our own experiences through our personal encounters with people, places and the environment around us. This meaning making introduces us to another significant aspect of human existence, the fact that we are essentially storytelling animals. We understand ourselves better through the narratives that we compose not only about ourselves but also about the world as a whole. Storytelling, then, is a way of making sense of the world around us. It becomes imperative to accept the fact that we cannot experience life in vacuum and isolation. All our actions, decisions and perspectives are guided by the intricate relationship we share with others. In telling the story of how we became who we are, and of who we're on our way to becoming, the story itself becomes a part of who we are. In fact, life stories do not simply reflect personality but they are personality.

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