

Literary analysis: the things they carried



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Literary Analysis: *The Things They Carried*

The Things They Carried, by Tim O'Brien, is a story that reflects on not only the emotional, but the physical weight of combat, and the devastating effects of the Vietnam War. The book tells the story of O'Brien and his platoon soldiers' experiences before, during, and after the war. The soldiers of Alpha Platoon carry with them the necessary and non-necessary materials for war and non-tangible emotions. The main themes discussed in this book include love and war; terror and fear; shame and guilt; mortality and death fantasy and fiction; burdens and responsibilities, and morality and humanity (French 4-6). Investing too much time in emotional or physical burdens can be an invaluable asset as well as a dangerous commodity.

Emotional and materialistic burdens (things they carried) are said to be figurative as well as literal. Both physical and emotional loads that they carry overwhelm every soldier in the story. Tim O'Brien expressed, " They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried (7)." These loads include materials required for the war as well as the emotions of love and terror they have in their minds. The physical burdens symbolize the hardships these soldiers undergo and the kind of pain they feel. Some of the loads they carried physically symbolize whatever the soldier is emotionally going through; for example, the pebble Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried always reminded him of Martha " It was a smooth pebble, an ounce at most. Smooth to the touch, it was the milky white color with flecks of orange and violet, oval-shaped like a miniature egg (O'Brien 7)." Henry Dobbins carried the protection of the pantyhose given to him by his girlfriend, " Dobbins carried his girlfriend's

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pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter” (O’Brien 9).

Tranquilizers that were carried by Ted Lavender represent the false remedy for fear that would not even save him from dying. Kiowa carried his grandfather’s hunting hatchet as an emotional attachment to his culture. He also carried the New Testament as a symbol of hope and faith, but his religion didn’t protect him from death by mortar fire. Norman Bowker carried the thumb of a dead Viet Cong boy; the thumb, according to Dobbins had no moral or value. The statement symbolizes that in war there is only death and destruction; therefore, there is no moral to war.

The author uses allegory when discussing “The Man I Killed”. The young, armed man killed by Tim O’Brien while he was on the trail is a great symbol occurring in *The Things They Carried*. To demonstrate the mental part of this, the author battles with the fact that he is responsible for the death of another human being. From a religious point of view, the matters of life and death are only left in God’s hand. Bearing this in mind, O’Brien feels obligated to punishment and the fate of killing someone. The killed man is perceived as the symbol of meaninglessness. This is pointed out in the story where it is suggested that an ally or enemy after death has struck-acts as a symbol of a dead soldier. Constantly, O’Brien draws parallel ideologies between the dead man and himself even though they are all conjecture. It could be speculated that O’Brien was a scholar who objected the Vietnam War. He only fought to make his town and family proud. This is a fair description that is highlighted by the author. Additionally, even though O’Brien does not understand if he threw a grenade that killed the young man, the memory of the corpse strongly re-occurs to him. The carried and

retained memory symbolizes the guilt and humanity after terrible acts of war. In regard to the killed man, O'Brien isolated himself from these disturbing imageries by speaking in the third person. O'Brien also creates fantasies as he marvels to nail the above-mentioned fact that he was challenging the Vietnam War as he gazed at the wreckage of the man's body (O'Brien 129). Such descriptions symbolize how the author was distancing himself from the reality of his actions. The guilt is evident in his imaginations of the life that was led by the man he killed, which encompass some fundamental elements which liken to his own life.

The imagery of the old and young Kathleen is used as a way to draw the reader into the story; the reader gains the ability to empathize and respond to O'Brien. *"The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you..... memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head..... There is the illusion of aliveness....,"* (O'Brien 230). In comparison to the reader, Kathleen is the recipient of the narrated stories. Differing from the reader, Kathleen and O'Brien influenced each other. For example, O'Brien gains new conceptualization which directly connects to his experiences in Vietnam. This is clearly revealed when he recounts and narrates the story of the young man he killed to the "older" Kathleen. In regard to the literary techniques, Kathleen fills the gap of communication between O'Brien and the readers. When the author takes Kathleen, to Vietnam it gives her the full scope of the tragedies which occurred during the war. The thing the reader can resonate on is the perception of the 10-year girl; the stink of the strangeness and filth of the country. Kathleen is young and naïve to what war really is, her

innocence doesn't allow her to fully understand the emotional significance of the Vietnam War and the memories that remain in O'Brien's life.

"The Field Trip" featuring the old farmer uses figurative language and idioms. The old farmer is burying the hatchet between the Americans and the Vietnamese people. With that said, Tim O'Brien guarantees Kathleen, his daughter, that the man is not upset at him. Such demonstrations connote that the grudge has been terminated. O'Brien and the old farmer stare at each other for a long time, where the author expects the farmer to stir a conversation regarding the Vietnam War. Additionally, when the old farmer resumes his farming routine, his attempts to improve the land's productivity symbolizing the need as well as the desire to get rid of and heal from the traumatic effects of the Vietnam War, despite the adverse effects faced by the old farmer's nation.

The dancing girl in the story "Style", reflects the poignant symbol of chaos, conflict and meaningless war (Wesley 5). In this regard, Azar is repelled by the fact that the girl keeps dancing despite the death of her village mates and family members when all was burnt to the ground. The book reveals that the girl cannot find the meaning of such devastating effects of the Vietnam War. This agrees with the conceptualization that O'Brien avows there is no one moral when it comes to a war story; that is, there is no right or wrong, and neither is there a core point. The dancing girl also symbolizes the lack of sense, and the amorality that pervades the emotional and physical ideology of the things carried in war. Arguably, soldiers who experienced hurdles while trying to reevaluate the true meaning and purpose of life after the end of the Vietnam War symbolize the mental perception.

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O'Brien used fallacy to demonstrate how the soldiers' fear of death, and their inability to protect themselves from dying may have driven them to carry their tokens of luck. Although in reality, no amount of luck, love, faith, or drugs can save a person from the destructions of war. Ted Lavender was the primary casualty of the company, the author describes him as a "recognized and frightened soldier" (O'Brien 16). Ted carried heavy materials and tranquilizers he thought could have subdued his unweighed fear; however, they were the exposing factors. "...and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers..." (O'Brien 6).

Jimmy Cross carried letters, pictures, and a pebble from his love, Martha. The character has been used to symbolize the emotional aspect of war. He is fantasizing about Martha more than often, something which led to the death of his fellow soldier. In this regard, Jimmy Cross mentally escapes from the war when he slips away, and daydreams of Martha; his inability to face reality led to the demise of Lavender. As the author asserts, "his mind wandered, accompanied with difficulties to focus on the war" (O'Brien 6).

After the death of Ted Lavender, he burned the letters and pictures he had previously carried. Jimmy Cross was then determined to perform and fulfill his military obligations without any element of negligence. As much as the passion he has for Martha still clouds his mind, he ignores the feelings he carries in his heart and completely plays his role. He promises himself never to allow such mistakes to happen again under his watch and restores his dignity. "No more fantasies, he told himself" (O'Brien 23). The aftermath of the Vietnam War reminds Jimmy Cross about Lavender's untimely death,

these memories support why Jimmy Cross never forgave himself for his emotional shortcomings (Chen 77).

Each character in the story carried the burdens that come with war: Death, fear of the unknown, the weight of a fallen comrade, and the gruesome killing of people, some of which are innocents. The characters, although boys on the cusp of young adulthood, focused on honing their military skills which would transform them into men. In this regard, everyone has his own external problems or inbuilt flaws. Notably, the things the soldiers carried symbolized inner conflict and battles, thus supporting the indifferences between love and war ideologies.

Tim O'Brien summed it up best, stating " War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; War makes you dead" (French 8).

Works Cited

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