

# Themes and motifs in tim obriens the things they carried



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Themes and motifs in The things they carried Having been nominated for Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1991, *The Things They Carried* (1990) by William Timothy O'Brien American novelist, short story writer, and journalist is considered one of the leading pieces of Vietnam literature. Since O'Brien had already been known for his work, this book was being waited for with great expectations. Published in 1990, *The Things They Carried* consists of 22 interconnected short stories dealing with the mental injuries American soldiers suffered from during and also after the Vietnam War.

Though a group of short stories, the book is often classified as a composite novel. In this paper, I am going to reflect on the various themes and motifs emerging in the story of *The Things They Carried*. Isolation and loneliness, fiction and reality, morality and immorality, Tim O'Brien hid a lot more under the surface than what is visible at first sight. Critics point out that O'Brien is constantly jumping between fiction and reality making the reader confused as to what has really happened and what is just the imagination of Tim O'Brien himself. In spite of the author's claim that "truth in literature has nothing to do with what actually happened", similarities between what he writes and what he experienced in the Vietnam War are clearly apparent. Ever since the publication of his first book *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* in 1973, the Vietnam War has been a recurring theme in his works. As a twenty-two-year-old man in the infantry, O'Brien "loathed the war and everything about it, but it would become the catalyst and continuing inspiration for his literary career." Given the theme as the Vietnam War, O'Brien no wonder writes in a realistic

style, reflecting precisely what happened in the war with all the description of ordinary life and philosophical ideas.

The title, too, is something that implies the short story's realistic features. As a matter of fact, when this story is set (1969-70), is the time when President Nixon introduced his policy named "Vietnamization". It basically meant that the United States impelled the South Vietnamese to take a greater role in fighting against the communism of Northern Vietnam with the provided equipment and the training of South Vietnam's forces. Meanwhile, the USA was to reduce the number of its combat troops, which, of course, did not mean the withdrawal of the U. S.

air forces that kept on giving a significant military assistance. The plan, not so surprisingly, was actually accomplished; in June, 1969, Nixon announced the removal of a great amount of U. S. troops. Consequently, the total 540,000 was reduced by 25,000 with a possible 60,000 to leave later on. It is largely the author's own combat experience that shapes the story of *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien clearly thinks that what matters is the power of the story whether what is told is true or not. According to him, power is always above factuality or actuality.

What I'm saying is that even with that nonfiction-sounding element in the story, everything in the story is fiction, beginning to end. To classify different elements of the story as fact or fiction seems to me artificial. Literature should be looked at not for its literal truth but for its emotional qualities.

What matters in literature, I think, are the pretty simple things whether it

moves me or not. Whether it feels true. The actual literal truth should be superfluous.

(Tim O'Brien) In this particular story, the third-person narrator is unidentified. His role is to describe the soldiers themselves and what happens to them. He is in fact omniscient, knowing all about the inner thoughts and feelings of the soldiers, though sometimes giving partial information about the events. The work basically recalls the experiences of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's infantry unit.

It is clearly Ted Lavender's death, taking place on April 16, around which the story is centered. The reader gets to know where the choice of the title comes from as the individual soldiers are described by what they carry with them. Consequently, we learn about letters from Martha, an English major at a college in New Jersey, photographs, a small stone, and good luck charms. We also read about weapons and all the necessary equipment. Even a girlfriend's pantyhose occurs in the text, wrapped around Henry Dobbins's (the biggest man in the platoon) neck, serving as a comforter. In fact, it is Dobbins who carries the heaviest physical load, the M-60 machine gun " which 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded.

" Marked by loneliness and isolation, O'Brien's life may be recognized in many of his protagonists. Born on 2 October 1946, O'Brien was raised in Worthington, Minnesota. Not having been able to avoid being drafted into the army, the Vietnam War inevitably left its mark on the author's writing career. " They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of

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blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment." (O'Brien) Moral burdens are recurring in the story.

Perhaps, who is tortured by these burdens to the greatest extent is the Alpha Company's commanding officer, Jimmy Cross. He is constantly preoccupied with the possible guilt of putting his love for Martha ahead of the safety of his men. Thus, to somehow relieve his spiritual pain, Jimmy burns her letters along with the photographs, the items that symbolize the "guilty love".

One motive connected to the moral burdens of the soldiers is their discarding of war equipment. Though the act described as "purely for comfort", the reader also realizes the symbolic function of the stripping. Ceased to be carrying all the heavy equipment the situation demands, the soldiers simultaneously free themselves of "all the emotional baggage of men who might die" and the "shameful memories" and the "common secret of cowardice barely restrained." Of course, from the outside, they are tough, hard men who are even able to joke about Lavender's death. Only in their sleep can they rest assured they will be safe and free of all the burdens both mental and physical. Certainly, these men cannot escape the realities of war, for they are where they are. Their ideals of home are nothing but mere distractions: memories and fantasies that serve as a mental handhold for soldiers who have been through a lot and will probably be for a while, too.

Again, it is Jimmy Cross who concludes that if it had not been for his love and imagination, his men would not have been put at risk.

He firmly believes that he is the one responsible for the safety of his men. He is only 24 though, (of about the same age the author was of when drafted), “a kid at war in love.” Jim eventually realizes that Martha “did not love him and never would”. This, perhaps, is already apparent to the reader. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey.

They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a days march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her but the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin, he was almost sure. (O??™ Brien p. 1)The story??™s tension undeniably lies in this issue, Cross??™s struggling between soldierly demeanour and a pressing guilt slowly taking hold of him.

Another motive of the story is the question of the individual and the collective. Usually part of war narratives, soldiers have to fight staying together as a unit while also fighting individually for their own sake. Their lives depend on each member of the unit and, at the same time, each soldier

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is fighting for the whole. Similarly, they carry their burdens sharing the necessary equipment but they also draw numbers and decide whose turn it is to search the tunnels. They represent a unit in military terms but they each also have their own private lives with their own families. The soldiers do start to come to terms with Lavender's death. They, however, also want to deal with it individually, either left alone or surrounded by an audience.

Jimmy Cross's own distribution of the burden lies in the burning of the letters from and photographs of Marta. As a matter of fact, Lavender's death may mark the end of Cross's daydreams. From now on, he will concentrate more on his military duties "without negligence." Interestingly, the narrator is often jumping between the soldiers' world's real happenings and the imagination. He himself, too, is carrying the burdens of Cross and his men. In fact, the juxtaposition of the mental and the physical, the real and the unreal experiences is one technique O'Brien uses with a great preference shown for it. The soldiers dream of "freedom birds" as they are what take them out of the country. Only imagination is left to them since they cannot escape reality.

"It was more than a plane, it was a real bird, a big sleek silver bird with feathers and talons and high screeching." Of course, when in war, people often seem to no longer recognize the boundaries between right and wrong. This is what happens to the Alpha Company, too, when, after Lavender is fatally shot in the head, Cross decides to burn the entire village of Than Khe. Consequently, we learn that there is no morality in war, for it has always made people make choices they would never make under normal

circumstances. O'Brien points out that loneliness can be just as  
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dangerous as the Vietnamese soldiers themselves. While waiting for the chopper to carry Lavender's dead body away, the soldiers smoke his marijuana, make jokes about his tranquilizer abuse, and talk how numb he probably was to feel any real pain. Though sad for the loss of Lavender, the soldiers are practically happy that they are still alive.

Cross, after all, decides to deal only with what military issues demand from him. Burning Martha's pictures was the only way of expressing his anger at her. Since most of the soldiers are at their late teens and early twenties, among the things they carry are guilt and cowardice besides the physical items they need in the war. Instead of giving well-detailed descriptions of the soldiers, O'Brien uses these items to describe the characters, those that serve to express his own disgust at and dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War. Works Cited O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*.

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