

Essay on the great gatsby and the things they carried

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



Both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Tim O'Brien are Minnesota-based authors who have written prescient and affecting works that highlight the human experience. In *The Great Gatsby*, the Roaring Twenties and all its debauchery are encapsulated in the tale of Jay Gatsby, poor boy made good, whose fortune and ambition is all for the sake of one woman he wants back in his life. In Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," an American platoon experiences horror, death and loss in the jungles of Vietnam, all while carrying various objects of both practical and personal significance to them. Both stories feature tales of men who struggle to figure out how to identify themselves and others through the power of possessions, all while pining for loves that may never be again.

O'Brien's language in "The Things They Carried," as he delineates and describes in great detail the appearance and source of all of these objects and what they mean to the soldiers, is scattered and stream-of-consciousness at times. This is meant to convey the abstract importance of these things in the soldiers' lives; some of them, like the M-16, are supposed to protect them, while others, like Lt. Cross' letters from his romantic interest Martha, carry emotional and spiritual significance. Much like Lt. Cross and Martha, Jay pines for Daisy Callahan, a girl he fell in love with in his youth, and so he worked hard since that day to be the kind of man Daisy wanted him to be - rich, powerful, charismatic. As Lt. Cross has his letters to remind him of the love that he has waiting for him somewhere else, Gatsby has the green light that he stares at endlessly, night after night, across the Hudson to remind him that Daisy is just there, so close and yet beyond his reach. Both Cross and Gatsby have strong ties to women who they have not seen in

a long time, and whose futures with them are uncertain - their obsessions and reliance on objects to personify that connection are important motifs of these respective works.

The use of the objects to show character and humanity to this group of men in "The Things They Carried" is one of O'Brien's strengths in the short story. When one of their company, Tim Lavender, dies, the rest of the men appropriate his things, in many ways appropriating parts of him as well - by smoking his marijuana and noting his abuse of tranquilizers, they get to know him through his objects. They wonder what it is like to suddenly be alive one moment, then dead the next, like Lavender was; O'Brien notes the importance these objects hold in bringing structure, hope and sense to the men's lives. In this short story, Vietnam is shown to be a horrific and chaotic place, where your life can be taken from you at a moment's notice; it is only through the things they carry that they are able to maintain their humanity (Calloway, 1995). Meanwhile, in *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby himself acquires a great many possessions - a huge mansion in East Egg, all the money in the world, a fancy fast car - all of which serve the end of becoming the Platonic ideal of the man he feels he is supposed to be. While Cross and his fellow soldiers hold on to objects to commemorate who they really are, Gatsby tries to reshape himself through these possessions and make a new identity for himself.

Both Gatsby and Cross are extremely unreliable characters; these two characters lie to themselves and others in order to be the people they want to be. It is impossible to completely trust the accounts of Lt. Cross within "The Things They Carried." Given his own uncertainty and the horrors of war,

his own narrative might be delusion that he manufactures in order to deal with the stresses of combat (Kaplan, 1993). O'Brien is honest about this lack of reliability, his characters openly stating their lack of understanding about what they are doing and why they are in Vietnam. The nature of reality is often called into question, and the line between ally and enemy is often blurred depending on the situation. O'Brien's use of imagination in his characters, particularly Lt. Cross, are done as a means to understand the complexities and uncertainties about the Vietnam war. This includes the subtextual meaning of the "things they carried" as a psychological barometer for each soldier's fears, anxieties and hopes, Lt. Cross' relationship with the girl in his letters, and more - O'Brien constantly provides the reader with multiple likely interpretations of an event. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald only really gives us one interpretation of its events; by the end of *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist, Nick, leaving the setting of the novel, New York City, for the Midwest, disgusted by the shallowness and falseness he found there. Nick describes himself as having incredible tolerance and morals - he believes that he has the moral right, especially when considering the naïve snobs of East Egg. As a result, he "comes to the admission that it has a limit" knowing that he cannot tolerate the poor behavior and morality of the East Eggers (Fitzgerald, p. 9). At the same time, he finds one jewel in the rough in the form of Gatsby, whom he idolizes, despite everyone else feeling he is an outsider. Nick finds this ironic, stating that he represents "everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald, p. 10). The passage indicates Gatsby's own ability to become a legend, meaning that his own work to create a mythic status for himself

worked; while Lt. Cross will forever be a lowly soldier fighting and dying in vain, Gatsby's acquisition of things and cultivation of personality has allowed him to live on in the fondness of others.

In conclusion, both *The Great Gatsby* and "The Things They Carried" provide stories of people who use objects to define themselves and others, as well as hold on to the possibility of finding love that has long been lost. Lt. Cross and his fellow soldiers attempt to survive Vietnam using the memory and significance they assign to their own possessions, while Gatsby attempts to become the biggest, most powerful man he can be by collecting the most stuff. These stories are exercises in character studies of men who wish to define themselves - they shape their reality to fit their own narratives. Cross and Gatsby still hold out hope that their loves are out there for them to return to (as shown through Cross' letter and Gatsby's green light, respectively), and so they work to improve and define themselves until they can get to them.

References

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