

# Worth the weight?

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Worth The Weight? " War is hell, " a famous quote from General William Tecumseh Sherman. In *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, we perceive the hell that men in war undergo. This enticing story is about the personal, mental, and physical hardships of soldiers in the Vietnam War. The title is revealing to the story itself by describing the items the soldiers carried. The tangible items that they lugged around are listed to the reader, but we are also shown the emotional burdens that lay deep in their hearts; this emotional baggage weighing much more than their physical luggage. It is substantial to identify this aspect because the things they carried in their hearts develop both hope and fear; they carry hope for their survival, but they carry the fear of possible death. Hope and fear are apparent in the tale when O'Brien explains what the soldiers in this story carry through the war. The author continues to list all the items hauled by these men, including helmets, canteens and ammunition, but it is no error that he begins the list with the relatively light weight of love letters from home. The letters are symbolic of another burden, which is a heavy one indeed. Every member of the platoon carries physical baggage which they can drop along the roadside, but the equally heavy emotional baggage can never be taken off. The men require these objects as they continue with the war; they are always marching, never staying long in one spot, so they need to carry all their necessities with them. What they carry also symbolizes what they would possess in their homes back in the United States. For example, the men carry a sewing kit despite realizing they will most likely never bother with it. They maintained carrying comparable items because it allows them to reminisce about home, which create hope as they look forward to going

home. As the things that the men carry are introduced, it becomes noticeable how the weights of the objects differ. Military tools, such as jungle boots, jackets, and the mine detector, put a lot of physical weight on the soldiers. Other items they carry that remind them of home, such as the sewing kit, are not as heavy. The military items, being so heavy, put strain on the soldiers, like the fear that weighs them down, and the lighter items are like the hope that keeps them going. The heavy items seem to get heavier as time goes on, as their fears become heavier, and the weight of the light items, that create so much hope, become less heavy while they get lost or get thrown away. Eventually these men will only carry their military items, items that create so much fear, and they will lose their light items, their hope, as more days go by. The concept of both hope and fear are noted in the layout of the writing as well. Through the journey of the story, O'Brien makes a giant leap from story to description, from hope to fear. He is very abrupt in explaining the materials they carried and their weight, yet he shows Lieutenant Cross' story in a very emotional way. The manner that he does this elicits the two personalities of Lieutenant Cross; the story exhibits his personal, humane side and the things he carried exhibits his serious professional side; to be a leader and a soldier. These two independent matters are explained in a very unique setup. Numerous times in the story, O'Brien abruptly goes from the description of the items they carry and suddenly he jumps into the mind of Lieutenant Cross. Lieutenant Cross' personal human side is concealed by the soldier in him; his decision to take charge and lead comes about after he lets out his emotions and realizes they're only doing him and his men harm. Love is an emotion the soldiers

carry as well. An emotion unfolded throughout the story, love is the reason for hope for the soldiers look forward to being in the presence of their loved ones back home, however love unfolds fear as well for death surrounds them. " Almost everyone humped photographs" of the loved ones they longed for back home and they carried good luck charms because of their love that they had for their own lives; " Lieutenant Cross carried his good luck pebble. Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot. " O'Brien spends the most time, however, explaining the love that Jimmy Cross has back home. He writes about his date with Martha, how Lt. Cross kissed her but she didn't return his feelings, and how he loved her but deep down he knew she would never love him. Cross uses a great amount of time admiring photos of her and reading her letters--and O'Brien demonstrates how this love prolongs his sanity through the war; this is the hope that keeps him going. " Lieutenant Cross gazed through the tunnel. But he was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it. " Although Martha is this image of hope for Lieutenant Cross, she is also an image that brings him fear. With this false hope of a nonexistent love, fear that Martha will not be there to come home to haunts him. Among the others, the chances of death create a fear that they could never be with their loves again, their only hopes. Although they carry the enormous burden of war, O'Brien introduces another emotion they carry:

hope. Even as they carry the fear of death, they still hold on to the hope that they will survive; that they will endure the hell they are in and manage to survive. The love of life and the weight their fellow soldiers are helping them carry creates a hope despite of their tangible fears. The concept of death puts more weight on these soldiers as they are in presence of death at all times as they kill and as they fear to be killed themselves. They go through towns cutting off thumbs, shooting anything alive, burning buildings to the ground, and kicking corpses. The emotional aspects of these duties are not shown, but their tasks are incredibly inhumane, and add on to the weight of their emotions. O'Brien gives us a glimpse of a soldier's emotional side as he writes: " After a young boy was killed, one soldier showed somewhat of a sympathetic gesture towards him. He put his hand on the dead boy's wrist. He was quiet for a time, as if counting a pulse, then patted the stomach, almost affectionately, and used Kiowa's hunting hatchet to remove the thumb. " As the soldier is considerate of the young boy who was killed, he still acts cruelly as he cuts off the boy's thumb. He does this to hold his emotions in check, to make sure that his emotions do not overtake him while in the horrible situation that he is in. Death is the focused on fear in the " The Things They Carried; " this story shows that these men in war cannot hide from their probable death. It is important to know, however, that all men are afraid to die, especially these soldiers. They " cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to god and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them. " The men carry the idea of death as they go through the war; it is all around them. The men are fearful that

they might die, and while they are handling this fear their duty still is to kill other people. The men's concern with death is very apparent as their partner Ted Lavender is murdered in a humiliating manner when he going to the bathroom; we see their moods turn from relaxed to greatly surprised. " Oh shit, Pat Kiley said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound-the guy's dead. I mean really". These men know that death is all around them, but now it is right beside them, it is real. Now, more than ever, they carry the fear of dying, although no one dares to show it. And while their moods seem relaxed, the men are not carefree. They do this to keep themselves in check, to not let their emotions get the best of them; they do this to not disappoint themselves, but most importantly, they act like this to impress their fellow soldiers. Ultimately, although, their pride does not matter, the men will realize later that they have lost all hope and are stuck living in fear. They will regret they ignored optimism, because they are now in hell with only darkness. Along with their material items and their fears and hopes, the men carry reminder of the war, results of what they have been through and of what they have done; and as they carry these results, their burden of fear piles up more each day. " They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections...they carried diseases; among them were malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various roots and molds. They carried the land itself. " The men's emotion are weighed down more and more everyday as more reminders pile up-more death, more sadness. This burden has led these men to be more like actors acting out this play of

war “ They were actors. When someone died, it wasn’t quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself”. These scripted actions are related to their fear of death. The men have learned that acting out a script makes the situations less real, more make believe, and less scary. After Ted’s death, Cross decides that the weight of his love for Martha is too heavy for him to carry. He realizes that his job is to lead his troops, and he can’t love her and do this at the same time. “ On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned the photographs...No more fantasies, he told himself. Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence; he would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself. " Cross decides to give up on this hope, because he fears for his troop too much. He feels as though Ted Lavender’s death was his fault, and that he should have somehow prevented it. He now knows that he should take his job as Lieutenant more seriously. Fear wins over hope when Cross decides to stop loving Martha and to become more of a leader to his men. As he throws out her letters and her pebble, he is giving up the hope that has led him through the war so far. And now that he carries only fear and no hope, Jimmy’s emotional side will eventually become almost nonexistent because nothing good is holding him up and everything bad is weighing him down. What these men carry through this war makes them more fearful, and ultimately weaker. What they carry grows heavier as they

long for their homes and as they face the fact that they could die at any given moment. And as they go to fight again and again, this weight becomes heavier. “ They carried the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, and longing—these were intangibles; but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight”.