

Tim o'brien "the things they carried", and his writing style

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



In his story "The Things They Carried" O'Brien depicts casualties of Vietnam war through evolution of characters' emotional and psychological state. Psychological pressure is caused by war, but O'Brien portrays it symbolically through material and emotional things the soldiers carry. He gives a detailed list of everything soldiers take. The evolution of emotional perception of the world and values is depicted through the character of Lieutenant Jim Cross.

His negligence, passion for a girl and narrow-mindedness causes a death of one of the soldiers, and this event forces him to revise his values and ethical code of a soldier. O'Brien uses a simple language, but symbolism and stylistic devices help him to unfold the message of the story. The short story "The Things They Carried" was published in 1990. It describes the events of Vietnam War and analyzes deep personal feelings of the main heroes, and things they were faced with during wartime. Soldiers carry different "things" with them.

Under "things" O'Brien means weapons and ammunition as well as terror, love, personal values and beliefs, but "almost everyone humped photographs" (p. 4). This story vividly depicts inner state of the characters during wartime and their living essentials such as fear, kindness, love, and uncertainty. These things are so important for them as ammunition during wartime, because they help the main heroes to overcome depression and difficulties they face with. It is important that "a set of things" has been changed, and at the end of the story the heroes carry a completely different "things" with them.

As Kaplan characterizes war stories: “ Almost all of the literature on the war, both fictional and nonfictional, makes clear that the only certain thing during the Vietnam War was that nothing was certain” (Kaplan, 1993, p. 43). The main character of the book is Lieutenant Jim Cross, a man who falls in love with a girl who does not return his feelings. Jim suffers greatly and can do nothing but dreaming about close relations with this girl. His negligence of duties costs life one of his soldiers, and after this terrible event, he puts an end to his falsedreams, and rethink most of his values and views.

It was really difficult to him to change his worldview but he was strong enough to cope with emotional burden, and re-sort his “ things”. The main idea of the text is that wartime has a great impact on feelings and views of people. When one person's actions begin to affect another person, we have moved from personal ethics to social ethics and often have to place some limits on human behavior (Bowen, Weigl, 1997). The story morality states that everyone is responsible for his own actions, and it is useless to blame everything on the people around you.

Jim Cross is depicted as the person who is full of life experience, but still has not found the truth of life. The story “ The Things They Carried” portrays that for some soldiers their burden is too heavy and they cannot carry it any longer. At the beginning of the story O’Brien describes things they carry: “ what they carry was partly a function of rank, partly a field spatiality” (O’Brien, p. 5). Further, for most of them it is difficult to change their attitude towards life, but the rat-trap of war has an great influence on their outlook.

For instance, Jim Cross has burned all pictures of Martha and shifts his attention to duties. " These burdens - the supplies the men carried to stay physically alive - are placed on the same level in terms of description as the objects carried that provided emotional sustenance to the men of the platoon" (Posek, 1997). The other main characters, Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Lee Strunk, and Henry Dobbins, are also carry their " things" which differ because they have different life experiences and expectations. Nevertheless, war forces them to carry the same psychological things as scary and hope.

They need to adapt to war, but the only way for them is to change their habits and personal values. Some of them like Ted Lavender's conditioned to this reality using their own way, but fails. Subconscious persuasion and mind-altering drugs have no effects. This causes lack of coincidence between war and personal feelings, since many of the characters struggling to develop their emotions while everyone else struggles to suppress their feelings. O'Brien depicts that when fear starts to dominate, people usually act in their own interests, they degrade as the keepers of customs and morality.

It remains disappointing that the social issues that are generally identified as pertaining to deal with questions of individual choice, rather than of communal responsibility. Besides, material things the characters carry emotion burden: " Grief, terror, love, longing these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. " (O'Brien p. 6). The remarkable feature of O'Brien's style is very exact descriptions: " As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross

carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a . 45(c) caliber pistol that weighed 2.

9 pounds full loaded. " (O'Brien p. 4). Detailed list of material things the soldiers carried helps O'Brien to force a reader to understand a burden they carried. O'Brien goes far beyond a simplistic description given a weight of each item the soldiers carries. " The weapon weighed 7. 5 pounds unloaded, 8. 2 pounds with its full 20 round magazine. The riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines... adding on another 8. 4 pounds at minimum, 14 pounds at maximum. " (O'Brien, p. 5). O'Brien is a keen observer of people, historical and war events which is manifested in his style of writing.

O'Brien depicts that a battlefield is the most terrible place he has ever seen. In this collection of the short stories he portrays the futility of soldiers deaths and sufferings of men who are still alive, but know that death is " around the corner". The message of his stories is that war is senseless, war brings only grief and constant tension to be killed. In the story O'Brien rings up questions concerning moralhealthof people, and in spite of all the negative life lessons soldiers understand what it is to be an individual.

Throughout the story there is a definite blame unmoral behaviour of the people, but it is most poignantly and symbolically demonstrated with the rejection of previous life. O'Brien shows that the inner state of soldiers has changed, and the readers cannot find a cynical man as most of them were before the war. On the other hand, war causes people to become insensitive. Obrien depicts that the psychological state of Jim Cross has changed. He has not a " a love man" as he was depicted at the beginning of the story.

To some extent, the moment of death caused the awakening of many characters in the story. For instance, Jim Cross sees the truth of life only when the soldier dies because of his negligence. O'Brien depicts that fear applied to love leads to individual degradation. Tolerance protects that diversity and demands respect. Jim Cross is a person who fights with his own imperfection changing his personal views after Ted Lavender's death. When fear starts to dominate, people usually act in their own interests, they degrade as the keepers of customs and morality.

It remains disappointing that the social issues that are generally identified as pertaining to deal with questions of individual choice, rather than of communal responsibility. The most impressive and powerful is the last scene of the story, when after the death of Lavender Jim burns Martha's letters and photographs promising never have fantasies. The facts mentioned above prove the idea that only in difficult situations people show their real nature and values. Toughness stems not from insensitivity but from a strict persona; code which functions as the characters' sole defense against the overwhelming chaos of war.

O'Brien possesses a unique style of writing which appeals to readers mind and emotions. Writing of the author is filled with meaning and symbolism, hidden in plain sight beneath a seamless narrative style that breathes not a word of agenda, of dogma, or of personal belief. In this way, his writing contains knowledge that is hidden to all, but give only hints to be comprehended. Also significant in the writing style of O'Brien is a tendency

to take on the character point of view in the narrative. The representation of the material is very affective.

The structure of the piece is aimed to compel readers to think the problem over. Clear representation underlined the author's awareness of the issues under discussion. The vocabulary is mostly neutral. Style and choice of words create a sophisticated tone, but, as the most important, unprepared readers understand the message of the chapter without difficulties, because the O'Brien's language is very vivid and clear. He appeals to such universal virtues as equality and faith, and gives insight look into the root of the problem.

The most important that the second chapter provides its readers, especially those who are not familiar with the reality of war. There are no romantic and lengthy descriptions in the short stories, but description of events and emotions are very concise and brief. O'Brien depicts that our ordered and organized world one feels sometimes the need of a change. He "draws the reader into the text, calling the reader's attention to the process of invention and challenging him to determine which, if any, of the stories are true" (Calloway, 1995, p. 249).

The repetition technique helps to shift logical stress and draws the readers attention to some key elements of the sentence structure, helping to shape author's message: "That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember

except the story. " (O'Brien p. 40). The collection of his stories can be called a " true" war story as it describes casualties of life experienced by soldiers.

O'Brien states " that war is Hell" portraying " in-depth and sensitive exploration of soldiers' hearts and minds" (Literary Encyclopedia. 2005). The author depicts that war is a dangerous and tremendous evil which change emotion and feeling, views and customs of soldiers. In spite of all the negative life lessons Jim Cross understands what it is to be an individual, and re-sorts his " things he carried". It was the only way for all soldiers to survive during war. At the end of the story " things" form a strict ethical code which functions as the characters' sole defense against the overwhelming chaos of war.

They set of things include the ideals of honor, courage and endurance in a world that is sometimes chaotic and always painful. The story teaches that a mature person acts in accordance with his own ethical code developing an approach to life that helps him get through the day. As O'Brien writes: " By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself" (O'Brien, p. 9). His characters are mature persons who act in accordance with their own morals developing an approach to life that helps them get through the day.

The evolution of a character from a narrow-minded person who does not care much about the consequences of his actions to a mature personality is another feature of style of writing: " I'd come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude, all the credentials, but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high,

civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I'd turned mean inside (O'Brien, p. 9).

To conclude, O'Brien uses different specific techniques and different stylistics devices to convey a message of the stories and appeals to emotions of readers and imagination. Evolution of characters, simple vocabulary and a deep emotional impact on the reader are the main writing features of O'Brien.

Brainstorming Ideas

- Why did O'Brien give detailed list of all things the soldiers' carries?
- O'Brien depicts a death of Ted Lavender. Why did he select this character?
- Was it so important to "kill" someone?
- O'Brien uses the theme of love at the beginning of the story. Why?
- What material and emotional things the soldiers carry? What is their meaning?
- What is the link between morality of the characters and their actions? Did it affect the other characters? How?

The war is not sweet for those people who suffer from it. O'Brien describes, explains and justifies soldiers in terms of a deep and ineradicable difference between "past" and "present". In stories O'Brien uses emotional impact with the implication of uncertainty, hesitation and deliberation. At the end, O'Brien criticizes horrific and piteous nature of war which change people and their world perception.

Symbols, metaphors, repetition helps to impress the reader and appeal to his emotions. Emotional burden should not be taken for granted at a causal explanation of death. However, a war giving special significance to the 'uniqueness' led to a particular concern about the common sense of reflecting the desire of individual to find relief from emotional pressure. For most of the soldiers a sense of being in the army to be fully expressed and developed requires that the people enjoy the right to decide upon their destiny.

Second, at a personal level, it obviously makes relationships with others possible, creating a world of meaning. War is a true journey for men: it helps to make choices, makes possible relationships with others, and gives strength and resilience. At the beginning of the story many characters were not prepared to rescue the life to save the life of others while at the end they became real soldiers ready to rescue their life.

Note Cards

1. " One thing for sure, he said. The lieutenant's in some deep hurt. I mean that crying jag -- the way he was carrying on -- it wasn't fake or anything, it was real heavy-duty hurt (O'Brien 17).
2. (about cowardice) " In many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down." (O'Brien 13).
3. The emotions are the heaviest burden because we cannot throw it down.
4. The death of Ted Lavender is a push, which forces soldiers to look for the truth (sense) of life.

5. The death of Ted Lavender is a watershed between past and future, old values and new ethics of a soldier.
6. " It was very sad... the things men carried inside. " (O'Brien 10).
7. " By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself" (O'Brien, p. 9).
8. " They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of 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, p. 3).
9. Fear applied to love leads to individual degradation.
10. Soldiers carried the burden of the world (war).
11. " Some escaped the fear, but dealt with the death and damage. Some made very hard decisions, and some just tried to survive" (O'Brien, p. 11).

Work Cited

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Draft Quotes: " As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a . 45(c) caliber pistol that weighed 2. 9 pounds full loaded. " (p. 4). " The weapon weighed 7. 5 pounds unloaded, 8. 2 pounds with its full 20 round magazine. The riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines... addin