

Emotions in the things they carried

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In his story “ The Things They Carried”, Tim O’Brien, enlightens the reader with the many faces and emotions of men. Although men are normally thought upon as the stronger of the two sexes; physically and emotionally, O’Brien lets us realize that this is not so. Men are weak in even the strongest of situations. And in this case, the situation is war. War is the main theme of the story.

Masculinity in the story

The ‘ soldiers’ mentioned are victims of many emotions, for example, love, hatred, stress, depression, etc.

They realize how important love and real-life relationships are. Most men who are prey to long lost love, try to let go of their past and focus only on their duties in vain. As they walk through the streets of Vietnam, they carry with themselves the basic necessities of survival and souvenirs to remind them of home. During these marches, they dispose of some of their supplies because they are aware that they will soon gain much more.

War is like a game to the soldiers, there are always winners and losers. It can be played with many different tactics.

It is all a matter of luck and strategy. But it is not all that bad. Some of the soldiers, who leave, return soon because the peace ‘ hurts’ them too much. And for some, the war is far too much to handle. This is mainly due to the losses they experience. Death is a frightening incident which occurs most often bringing with it tears of pain and stress. The soldiers are afraid of killing as well. The first kill is always the hardest to bear. These soldiers imagine what kind of a life their enemies led before getting involved into

such a situation. Deep, dark marks are left within the hearts of these soldiers as they spend endless days on the battlefields. Voegele quotes O'Brien as talking about fear,

“ In many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down.” (Voegele).

The soldiers have dreams about escaping the brutal nature and reality of war because they are unable to remove fear from their hearts. Most of the time, there are petty quarrels that take place, some leading to physically fights, which soon lead to renewed friendships, trust and written pacts, and then ending in death and sorrow.

Voegele quotes O'Brien provides the weight of the objects which the soldiers carry by saying “ 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.” (Voegele). The story above portrays the masculine romance of the soldier as it portrays the tough and brutal nature of their experience in war. These soldiers have to be tough and brave in the battlefield in order to prove that they are worthy males.

Experience of war

O'Brien gives a graphic portrait of the experience of war by mentioning the weight of the things which the soldiers carry. The soldiers also have to face other external factors like the weather during the time of war “ They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere...they carried gravity.” (Voegele). However according to O'Brien the soldiers have several emotional problems which are

much heavier for them than the physical things they carry. " Grief, terror, love, longing these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight." (Voegelé).

Many different stories are discussed and the lust for women is often brought up during camp talks. But many stories of lost and dead soldiers are never spoken of. Sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of respect, and sometimes out of sheer disappointment and misunderstanding. These stories, burdened by the soldiers sometimes drive them into a negative attitude. Most of these soldiers tend to commit suicide. " That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him" (O'Brien, pg. 156).

The author describes his feelings of when he lost a true friend due to a sudden attack. Kiowa had drowned into the depths of the sewage during this attack. Although O'Brien had tried to help, the smell was excruciating to him. In the story, there is also specifically rumors of a girl smuggled into Vietnam by a soldier are brought up. This ' soldier' had to spend a large sum of money into getting his girlfriend there. He warned about how dangerous it was. All the men are duly jealous of the young couple.

Superstition is common among the men. They keep certain ' things' with them at all times, believing these items may bring them luck. To a few of them, they actually do bring luck! But religion is also a big part of these soldiers' lives. They chat about how one day; they would like to be monks and priests, and about how they would like to help people and be kind to them instead of killing anyone and anything that came in their way. As the war wages on, the soldiers try to find amusement in the harshness around them. The camps they set around for themselves are of unpleasant

surroundings. From the ruthless weather, to the creepy crawlies and even then unbearable stench, these soldiers have witnessed it all.

They joke about the times they had almost died or had cried out of fear of facing death during combat. Most of these men undergo many changes, especially in their personalities. Some of the soldiers like Norman Bowler were decent and law abiding citizens when they were civilians. But this man transformed himself into a heartless creature and around his neck he carried a thumb which had been removed from the body of a Viet Cong guerilla fighter. The Viet Cong guerilla fighter was only a teenager. Bowler was very proud of his first kill. But there were also others, like Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who had been sensitive during their civilian life.

But the effects of war do not change them into animals. They stay the same, lovable humans, hoping for an escape into the arms of their loved ones. But when they face their enemies, regardless of their age or gender, these soldiers are emotionless beasts. They even torture human babies, mostly orphan infants, brutally. O'Brien refers to the babies as a ' young water buffalo'. Readers will find the story to be devoid of any emotions as the American soldiers engage in torture and brutality for sports and recreation.

However, these men tend to feel awful afterwards. They think over what they have done and regret these events so much that they end up hurting themselves in order to finally escape this reality. While some, make all the killing seem like child's play. And later, all these men share and relate their own life stories to the people they kill during the war. This, according to O'Brien, brings them back to life. He based his life on one motto, " Once you're alive, you can't ever be dead" (O'Brien, pg. 244).

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Tim O'Brien does not believe in death. The soldiers, even though they are fighting day and night for their country; feel that it is useless to wage this war. They cannot find any real reasons as to why they are there, except that they were appointed to this duty without any consideration. This lack of purpose also drives the men into insanity. When finally, the war comes to an end, the soldiers return home to again lead a 'normal civilian' life. But the bitter memories of Vietnam prevent these men from ever being sane again. The war has cast a heavy shadow over the hearts of these once good-willed, god-fearing men. Although, most of the story is fictional, Tim O'Brien portrays to his readers the cruelty of war.

He wants people to understand how it felt to experience death, so that they could finally accept it. He tries to share his feelings and the feelings of his fellow soldiers through detached words. He talks of the torture and pain, the crying and screaming, the innocent civilian families watching their loved ones being put to death in front of their eyes aware that their turn is soon to come. The experience of war is romanticized in the novel as the author provides an account of the experiences of soldiers. These soldiers are living in hell but they have a clear concept of the culture of war. They know that they are making history by becoming participants of war.

Conclusion

This story clearly states that even men are feeble creatures who fall victim to emotions no matter what they do. The life of a soldier may seem to be filled with hardships and killing. But no one really knows the truth behind the lifeless eyes. We, civilians wonder what it might be like out there on the battlefield and how these soldiers live their lives without emotion.

When, in reality, they share as much emotion as any normal human being would. They fear the blood shed around them. Some display their feelings and confess their love and fears, while others decide to hide themselves by displaying a merciless attitude. Every experience is hard for them. Every new day is a bigger challenge. If the cards are not played right, there is a loss, sometimes many losses. The story is an important reminder about the horrors and brutalities of war. It tells us how war changes the experiences of soldiers.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. Broadway. (1998)

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