

The things they carried- tim o'brien research paper example

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



Tim O'Brien was born and raised in Minnesota and drafted for service in Vietnam after graduating from college in 1968. Like most students at the time he was opposed to the war, and even considered running away to Canada. Instead, he ended up as an infantry lieutenant in the notorious Americal division, which had been responsible for the My Lai massacre. After returning from Vietnam in 1970 he was a graduate student at Harvard University and then a journalism intern at the Washington Post. After returning to Minnesota he eventually took up a career as a university teacher of creative writing. His 1990 novel *The Things They Carried*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, is often considered one of the best Vietnam novels and perhaps one of the best ever written about any war. He mixes many real memories of his own with those of characters in the story, and with recollections about their experiences before the war with their lives afterwards. His fictional platoon commander is also one aspect of himself, looking back at the war from many years later and writing stories about it. O'Brien's central argument and ongoing theme is that war had no morality, virtue or redeeming features of any kind, and that a reader will only know "a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (Merricks 2010).

The main theme is that the young men of Alpha Company carry many physical and emotional burdens which linger on long after the war. As they walked through the jungles and swamps of South Vietnam, they carried weapons, equipment, personal items, and also carried the dead and wounded off the battlefield as well as the guilt for having survived. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried the responsibility for the men under his

command and guilt about the war they died, as well as a peculiar love for Martha that was probably not real. All of them carried fear, not only of the enemy but also the fear of appearing to be fearful, cowardly or dishonorable. They are often skeptical about the war and the entire colonial-imperial enterprise in Asia, finding the death of their comrades in the jungles and swamps to be futile and pointless. They will carry all the memories and images with them for the rest of their lives, just as O'Brien also carried the burden of recalling and recording the war and its aftermath. In general, the entire atmosphere of the novel could be described as Orwellian, with a pervasive theme of unreality or surrealism.

In the first story in the novel, Lt. Jimmy Cross is depicted as carrying letters from a mysterious woman named Martha, who he loves in a peculiar way while at the same time doubting that she has any real feelings for him. She is back home in the 'real' world, enjoying poetry and lectures on Chaucer but Cross is no longer able to connect with any of it. At the same time, he is carrying the guilt for Ted Lavender, the first of his men to die in Vietnam, although he will not be the last. His men keep dying in Vietnam for nothing, yet he "humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps", and also carried two pictures of her in his wallet (O'Brien 3). He recalled watching the movie Bonnie and Clyde with her, and the two lovers being gunned down at the end, and thinks that when it was over he "should've done something brave" like Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*, carrying her up the stairs and tying her to a bed (O'Brien 4). Vietnam was not like World War II, however, and produced no John Wayne-like heroes, and the fiancés and sweethearts were not waiting patiently at home for the heroes to return

like the movie actresses of the 1940s.

Cross does have a sense of responsibility for his men and also carries guilt for Lavender's death, although this guilt is not necessarily grounded in reality since the man was simply shot dead one day and there was nothing he could have done about it. Ted Lavender did not die a movie death, either, but just flopped down dead with part of his head blown off and never got up again. He burned Martha's letters and pictures after Lavender died, and threw away the lucky pebble she had sent him. He loved her more than the men, and because of this weird obsession with her " he had difficulty keeping his attention on the war" (O'Brien 8). After that time, he determined to be a stricter and more attentive officer and his feelings for Martha turned into " a hard, hating kind of love" (O'Brien 23). He continued to love her in this sick and peculiar way, but at the end of the film he did not get the girl, nor was he sure that he really wanted to. He did not meet Martha again until a college reunion in 1979, and by that time she was a nurse and Lutheran missionary who had lived all over the world. She was unmarried and told him that she preferred to stay that way, and expressed no real emotional or even sexual desire for Cross. In later years, when he was getting drunk with O'Brien, he admitted that he still loved her and probably always would, although the writer later conceded that the whole story might have been false or only partially true (O'Brien 27).

The men of Alpha Company carried all the food, weapons and consumer good that the American Empire at its height could produce, and they do not travel lightly and quickly through the jungle like their Viet Cong enemies. They were the beneficiaries of " the great American war chest" that buried

Vietnam under more sheer tonnage of bombs and explosives than was used in the entire Second World War and they could deliver unlimited amounts of firepower against any target (O'Brien 15). At the same time, they carried the decay of their own empire with them, along with " a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility", but whenever one of their own dies they routinely destroy the nearest village and then call in artillery and air strikes (O'Brien 19). All of the characters in Alpha Company have the exact same kind of fear and insecurity, which is one reason many of them ended up in Vietnam and also why they keep fighting the war they regard as pointless. Some of them carried the body parts of Vietnamese with them for good luck or to show their toughness, but at the same time they also felt " a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (O'Brien 7). All of them also carried " the emotional baggage of men who might die" and also their hidden cowardice and fear of death that they never dared to show to each other (O'Brien 20). They were not devoted to the American Empire or any great cause or ideology. They had not volunteered or allowed themselves to be drafted into service for Vietnam for any positive reason, either, and had " no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor" (O'Brien 20). They are unwilling participants who are caught up in fighting a pointless war for a corrupt regime in Vietnam, a strong sense of futility and meaninglessness, and also a fear of appearing to be afraid, cowardly or weak.

This is not necessary a work of fiction since most of it was based on actual characters and events as O'Brien experienced them during the war. Even within the novel, in the section about " How to Tell a True War Story", he

states the more 'normal' it seems the less likely it is to be true, while often "the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness" (Greenyea 2010). He tells his stories in a plain, direct and simple style that carries with it the ring of veracity and eyewitness testimony. Beyond that, war is not only evil, but it is everything else as well, including "mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead" (Greenyea 2010). He mixes the fictional accounts with recollections of his own men who died in Vietnam, such as Norman Bowker driving around in his father's Chevy near a lake in the Midwest, but then ending up dead near a lake in Southeast Asia.

O'Brien's novel ends with a dream he had in 1990, in which he is nine years old and going ice skating with a girl his own age, who later died of a brain tumor. In the dream, he imagines that she is still alive or at least existing in some world where there is no disease, death or war, and then he sees all of his men who were killed in Vietnam. Young Timmy is free and happy, while older Tim takes a "high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (Greenyea 2010).

This last section reveals that O'Brien was very likely suicidal as a result of all these memories of the war, which never seem to end, and that he must write about them in an attempt to save his life. In *The Things They Carried*, the past blends completely with the present and the future, and the living with the dead. It is a haunting and surrealistic book, and true to his word, O'Brien offers no real moral, resolution or happy ending. Nothing good came out of

the war and it was essentially a pointless and futile exercise, while its unwilling participants died for nothing. Unlike their enemies, who were there for the duration and had no choice except victory or death, they were not fighting for any great cause or noble idea or even some ideology like communism or nationalism. They did not want to be there and were well aware that the war was unpopular at home, with the public generally indifferent or hostile to them. No wonder many returned the U. S. confused and disoriented, feeling that their sacrifices were for nothing, or at least nothing they could comprehend. America's most unpopular war simply cannot be written about like most of the others, with the basically decent American military fighting against an evil and oppressive enemy or for a good cause. None of the Vietnam literature has ever has themes even remotely like those, but only this sense of lives being wasted for no reason and the participants left struggling to understand why this nightmare had happened.

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