

The things they carried

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



Unit Essential Question Journal Response - Do we, as human beings, truly have the ability to make choices in our lives, or are we controlled by fate? The title of the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien refers to the small number of private possessions that soldiers carried with them in their kit bags. Through these objects which range from photographs and letters, to food and drugs, hygiene and medical items, Bibles and an any number of useful or sentimental trinkets that each man judged to be important. O'Brien notes: "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity." (O'Brien, p. 2) which suggests that they had really no choice in the matter, as if the nature of each man determined what objects he needed to survive the horrors of war. In the rest of the story these items are used as a way of emphasizing the different kinds of emotional baggage that each man carries with him. Jimmy's photographs signify his innocence and inexperience, while other photographs are used to remember partners and children. Some items denote rank, others denote role in the army, and still others provide much needed reminders of life at home, far from the war. One question which the book explores is how far the men live out their predestined fates - some returning from the war unharmed, while others are killed, and still others are damaged by physical or mental injury. By basing the story around these tiny objects, the author seems to be saying that people's lives can be mapped out just from looking at what they have on their person.

In some ways the book confirms this initial impression that everyone just follows a set plan, as if the objects are a map to the path that the person is fated to follow, but in other ways there is a deeper questioning of the whole meaning of war. It seems to me that the book is showing the reader that

human life is not negotiable, and it is predestined to go a certain way, which in turn is decoded through everyday objects. It is true that people are largely controlled by a larger fate, but at the same time acts of heroism and love single out moments when people make moral choices, and this is not due to fate. The point is that acting out of free will is an exceptional thing, while following along a predetermined path is what most people find themselves doing.

Reference

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*.