

# The things they carried book analysis essay sample

War



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Passage: “ Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should’ve done.” P. 2 Small Meaning: In this quote, Lieutenant Cross is deeply in love with Martha. He carries a picture of her in his pocket. The one date him and Martha went on, he thinks he blew it. So every time he glances at Martha’s picture, he thinks of something more he should have done. Big Meaning: Everybody regrets. This book is not just a war book, but a book about men’s feelings while they were away at war. The quote makes the reader realize every man that was drafted, left something extremely dear and personal back home. Everyday these men would realize that. It’s about having the courage to let go and move forward.

Passage: “ They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared but it was not a battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march.” P. 14 Small Meaning: This quote talks about how long and far the soldiers would move. They became numb to marching and walking because it was so common to them. Big Meaning: This passage explains to the reader how the Vietnam War was a different kind of war. This passage shows that this war was more focused on “ search and destroy” method. It wasn’t just a “ set up camp and wait” type of war. This passage tells that these men walked long and hard. It wasn’t just about killing, it was about going the distance to get the job done and done right.

Passage: “ They did not submit to the obvious alternative, which was to close the eyes and fall.” P. 21 Small Meaning: Here, O’Brien talks about the human aspects of what the men carried as weight and/or burdens on their shoulders. He talks about how the men never gave up. They always fought.  
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**Big Meaning:** The reader understands here that men in war know their options. They understand all the alternatives they have instead of having to fight. The passage can be interpreted as all men have bravery in their souls. They were strong enough to be bigger than the ugly, terrible war, and they fought for their lives, their loved ones, and their country.

**Passage:** “ The war wasn’t all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet...You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance.” P. 30&31 **Small Meaning:** Here, O’Brien introduces the chapter Spin. He’s trying to lighten the mood by getting the reader’s mind off of the bad aspects of war and talk about the good. **Big Meaning:** The war isn’t transformed into sweetness and light, it’s spun. All of the happy memories that the men have, are rooted into the fact that men are at war. If the men did not let themselves have the happy moments, they would be more miserable than they already are. The story that follows this quote isn’t exactly “ sweet.” Azar did give the boy a chocolate bar, but he also is nice to the soldier who shot the boy, ran out of ammo, and couldn’t finish the job. Again, it’s fact that these moments are rooted in the inevitable fact that the men are at war.

**Passage:** “ If you weren’t humping, you were waiting. I remember the monotony. Digging foxholes. Slapping mosquitoes. The sun and the heat and the endless paddies. Even in the deep bush, where you could die any number of ways, the war was nakedly and aggressively boring. [...] But it was a strange boredom. It was boredom with a twist, the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders. Well, you’d think, this isn’t so bad. And right

when you'd hear gunfire behind you and your nuts would fly up into your throat and you'd be squealing pig squeals. That kind of boredom." P. 32&33

Small Meaning: Here O'Brien is talking about how long and tiring each day could be. He explains it almost as if he was living each day over and over again. Sometimes the only thing the men could do was wait. But waiting

wasn't a good thing, because anything could happen unexpectedly. Big

Meaning: War is boring, but it's a nervous, terrified boredom. Hollywood often presents war as gruesome, bloody, unbearable, and not a happy sight to look at. It's not that there isn't a lot of blood and gore in *The Things They Carried*, but mostly the war is presented as it is in this quote – as a lot of downtime and marching in which you could unexpectedly die.

Passage: " Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream." P. 55

Small Meaning: Here O'Brien is contemplating on whether or not to jump to swim to the shoreline of Canada. He is terrified at the

thought of war and doesn't want to go. He doesn't want to disappoint his

family and friends by not going and running away though. Big Meaning: This passage shows that when these men got their draft cards, it wasn't easy.

They did not just pack up and go. They fought, cried, were scared, and

feared for their lives. It was that sense of a feeling that you may never return home.

Passage: “ War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also a 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.” P. 76

Small Meaning: O’Brien is giving the all the different ways war can be interpreted by a soldier. They live that lifestyle for so long; they make the best of everything out of it. They refuse to be miserable all the time, so they have to have some good come out of it. Big Meaning: This quote is pretty significant to the work as a whole because it really encompasses O’Brien’s mixed feelings about the war. He doesn’t agree with the reason that he’s fighting in the war, yet at the same time he’s almost drawn to it because of its sheer immensity and scope. This quote is interesting to me because it is such a clever, beautiful description of something that is terrible and has taken so many lives. It captures many emotions that a soldier might go through during the course of war, and really allows the reader to gain a first person perspective of what war is like.

Passage: “ Thought it’s odd, you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead. You recognize what’s valuable.” P. 78 Small Meaning: O’Brien is trying to explain what it is like when you’re almost dead. It doesn’t only mean physically dead either. It can also be mentally and emotionally. He is trying to show the reader how it feels to be dead in your own body. Big Meaning: The reader can interpret that when you’re almost dead, no matter what way it is, your senses come alive. You realize what matters most in your life, and you fight to keep that and yourself alive. Everyone has had

that moment that you've died inside. It's like you hit rock bottom. That's when you realize the little things in life.

Passage: "The thing is," he wrote, "there's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam...Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him...Feels like I'm still in deep shit." P. 150

Small Meaning: In this letter, Norman Bowker writes O'Brien to tell him that he believes his life has amounted to nothing after the war. He has no faith in himself that his life is going to turn around. Bowker feels as if he left the real Norman back in Vietnam. He just isn't the same. Big Meaning: This passage is proof that war changes people. Norman took his own life because of it too. The war has made so many people in this world go crazy, that they either kill themselves or become really bad off in life. That is how bad war scars some people. It is never a pleasant thing to go to war. There is always going to be bad aspects of it, in the past and in the future.

Passage: "Azar shrugged. After a second he reached out and clapped me on the shoulder, not roughly but not gently either. 'What's real?' he said. 'Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real is.'" P. 194

Small Meaning: In the passage, Azar is talking to Tim about what is real. He claims that he has been so sucked into the military life that he is forgetting what war is and what real life is.

Big Meaning: This shows how captivating the war can be. If you take men out of their normal routines and lives, they start to forget. If you put someone in an insane asylum, they're going to forget the outside world. War is kind of like

that as well. These men forgot what their normal lives were. They ate, slept, and breathed the war life. It just shows the reader how bad the war can mess with the brain.

Passage: “ But in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say ‘ Timmy, stop crying.’” P. 224 Small Meaning: Linda, a nine year old little girl, died from a brain tumor when O’Brien was young. O’Brien was in love with Linda. This quote explains that even three decades later, he still thinks about her and how he wished she would not have died. Big Meaning: The big meaning here is that the littlest and fondest memories can pull the men away from war. O’Brien would think about Linda while he was there so he would feel the comfort that she put on him. When you lose something, you want to keep that in your memory forever and never let it go away. That’s what O’Brien wanted to do with Linda, was write about her. In his writings she was never dead, but much so alive.

Passage: “ Before the chopper came, there was time for goodbyes. Lieutenant Cross went over and said he’d vouch that it was an accident. Henry Dobbins and Azar gave him a stack of comic books for hospital reading. Everybody stood in a little circle, feeling bad about it, trying to cheer him up with bullshit about the great night life in Japan.” P. 212 Small Meaning: The boys in O’Brien’s brigade are waving Sanders off in a helicopter. Sanders shot himself in the foot so he could leave the war. It was too much for him to handle and he needed an easy way out. Big Meaning:

The big meaning here is that the effects war had on these men was no joke. Sanders was so miserable that he felt obligated to shoot himself. The thing is though, nobody blamed him. Sanders just had the guts to actually do it. The reader understands here that sometimes the war could be so horrible, that these men injured themselves to be able to get out of it.