

Guilt, hopelessness and shame

Literature



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Guilt, Hopelessness and Shame in the Novel the Things They Carried

Introduction The novel “ the things they carried” is made up of several stories in one book compiled by the author, Tim O' Brien. In his work there exists a variety of themes which indicate just how rich this book is in terms of diversity. Tim brings out the different themes through the use of the various stories, however what stands out is the fact that several themes keep on recurring in the different stories in the book. This is an aspect which shows how the themes are universal in their occurrence at least according to his context. Some of these themes include guilt, hopelessness and shame. To understand their implication it is vital that we single each out and bring it as a single entity and discuss it at length on its own (Bloom, 2005, 72). Guilt Of all the major themes in the book, guilt is one of the most prominent in the book. It is depicted in several instances in the book and is clearly used to show the things that the soldiers used to do during the Vietnam War and how they implicated on their conscience as human beings and in return bringing them the feeling of guilt. They might have carried other tangible stuff with them but as soldiers they too had to carry the blame for the death of their several colleagues who died during the war. Thus even though guilt is not tangible they still had to carry it as soldiers in the war. Lavender for example is the first member of the Alpha to die. A low ranking soldier in the group, we are told that Lavender deals with the anxiety and stress brought to her as a result of the war by taking tranquilizers and marijuana. This is a pure show of one who is guilty of something and to keep away from the same he has to get intoxicated to avoid facing the real world (Brien, 1990, 65). The fact that she is short in the head while Lieutenant Jimmy his senior has his mind distracted by the his college crash, makes Jimmy have guilt

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within him as he feels responsible for the death of the junior officer. It is revealed in the story, "Love" that Jimmy Cross did not have his feelings reciprocated for his college sweetheart, Martha whom he loved before embarking on the Vietnam War. This makes him feel responsible for the death of Lavender yet twenty years had elapsed. "On the Rainy River," is yet another story where O'Brien explains the circumstances that led to him join the mission to Vietnam. He clearly blames guilt for his presence in Vietnam. Upon his reception of the draft in June 1968, he becomes a little bit confused and he is forced to head to the north near the Canada border where he contemplates crossing into Canada as he claims he did not believe in the Vietnam War (Brien, 2002, 78). Though his inner self does not agree with the fact that they should go to war in Vietnam, the feeling of guilt as a result of disappointing his country and family makes him decide to go for the war after all. He says that he doesn't want to be accused of being afraid of the war and also not to disappoint his family who has a lot of hopes in him. In the story, the man I killed, O'Brien feels guilty over the man he killed in the street. He imagines how the life of that man would have been had he not killed him, how his childhood had been and how his future would have been had he not killed the man by throwing a grenade at his feet (Natchez and Robbins, 2003, 90). This is a way of exhibiting the theme of guilt in the novel. The soldiers constantly talk of their inability to communicate to their friends or families on their experiences on the war. They are ashamed of whatever happened during the war in Vietnam that they can't share freely. They become isolated in their own world and are thus suffering as a result of shame. The atrocities of how their fellow soldiers died on their watch is so shaming that they rather not talk about them to anyone. Norman Bowker

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commits suicide after the sense of shame and his inability to communicate even makes it worse for him (Updike and Kenison, 1999, 34). They are so much engulfed in a world dominated by war and when they return home they are not able to relate to the society freely as their shame is weighing down on them. In his story on the rainy river, we see that O'Brien did not want to go to war but because he feared being ashamed by his peers as a coward he goes to the war. Here we see that the fear of shame may make someone do even the things he does not believe in. O'Brien did not believe in the war but because of he did not want to feel ashamed or shame his family he went. Fear of shame as well affects the soldier's relationship with each other during the war and as such we see that Curt Lemon decides to agree for his teeth to be pulled out despite the fact that it was a perfectly healthy tooth. This he does just to avoid shame because he had fainted in an earlier meeting with the dentist. Jimmy Cross only goes to war because his friends have gone and as such he becomes a poor leader out of fear for shame making most of his subjects be killed during the war (Kennedy, 2003, 46). O'Brien argues that there is destruction brought about by the sense of isolation and leading to hopelessness among the soldiers. Jimmy Cross for example has his hope dashed by Martha's rejection when he returns home after the war. This adds salt to the injury already sanctioned by the war itself making him very hopeless. O'Brien also emphasizes on the fact that had he not been writing he would have died just like Norman Bowker (Oates, 1992, 107). This statement implies that he too had lost hope in life just like Bowker did and committed suicide. Consequently in "The things they carried," guilt, hopelessness and shame are the major motifs presented by the author.

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