

Literature review on the things they carried literary analysis

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“The things they carried” is a uniquely put together story by Tim O’Brien that is partially fiction and non-fictional. This is a work that narrates events from the Vietnam War according to Tim O’Brien. Tim O’Brien is the writer of this work. Since he went and fought in the Vietnam War, it is evident that he used his own experiences as inspirations for this book. However, O’Brien maintains that the story is a fictional account of what actually happened at Vietnam (Bloom, 20).

O’Brien uses the Alpha Company as the focus of his story. The story opens up by literally describing the things members of the Alpha Group carried. For instance, the very first sentence of the story states that “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross Carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey.” The other literal things they carried include “P-38 can openers, pocket knives, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, Military certificates” O’Brien makes a note of mention the exact weight of these things as he describes them (Colella, 98). He also alludes to the non-tangible things they carried such as memories, stories, weights, hopes, guilt, curses and associations. This approach helps the reader understand what the men underwent during the Vietnam War. The detached manner in which O’Brien gives an account of “the things they carried” points to the men’s technique of avoiding the pain of having to carry the different weights. Throughout the book, O’Brien uses order, matter-of-factness, and deflection as a technique (Anisfield, 120).

The introduction of the unfortunate death of Ted Lavender in the story presents an omniscient atmosphere. Most of the soldiers were only experiencing death for the first time and it scared them immensely. This was

especially the case for Lieutenant Cross, who even held himself responsible for the death of Lavender (Bloom, 20).

The second part of the story takes place after the war. Cross, who seems to be the main character of the book, visits his writer friend Tim. The Tim character in the book closely resembles the real Tim O'Brien. During this visit, they converse about the things they still carry in their lives. In this part of the story, they still look back to the war and remind each other of the things they carried. They talk about Martha and the love Cross always had for her. It is in this episode that Tim tells Cross of his intention to write about the events of their experiences in Vietnam. This acts as an introduction of the themes built up on throughout the story. These themes include guilt, complicity in heinous acts, role of women, and the differences between those who fought and those who did not fight (Colella, 98).

In the episode entitled Spin, O'Brien hopes to show that "The war wasn't all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet." This gives the reader hope of hearing the good accounts of the war. However, the examples that O'Brien uses are far from sweet. This juxtaposition is used severally in the book. Therefore, the reader understands that the war was not pleasant at any time (Bloom, 30).

The episode "On the Rainy River; Enemies; Friends" records events that occurred before the Vietnam War. Using flashback, O'Brien shows how the draftees fled to Canada while the guilt or duty-bound young men who decided to fight regardless of their fear. This part reveals the weakness of some of the characters and celebrates heroism. In this light the narrator asserts "All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we

will like to behave like the heroes of our youth” the episode reveals that the men of the Alpha Company failed to do so.

O’Brien uses critical questions to help the reader meditate about the thin line between fiction and reality. Through these critical questions, O’Brien is able to establish the truth without actually mentioning it. This style of writing is referred to as metafiction (Colella 102).

O’Brien is not straight forward in his presentation of this story. He uses confusion artistically, to trigger the mind of the reader. For instance, while he maintains that the story is fictitious, the Tim character resembles the real Tim O’Brien in several aspects. However, O’Brien introduces doubt in the mind of the reader by presenting a few differences between the real Tim O’Brien and the character Tim (Colella 102). The narrator records in the novel that “ War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also 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.” For this reason, it is not easy to differentiate between what is true and what is false in this story. It is hard to decide whether the work presented is actually fiction or non-fiction. This is the style that is predominant in the story. It helps in creating tension and making the story interesting to read (Anisfield 123).

O’Brien constantly uses repetition in the story. He gives particular details concerning some events and even retells them for purposes of emphasis. For example, we read about Kiowa’s death in more than one scenario. Further, O’Brien uses a non-linear presentation style whereby he does not narrate

chronological sequence of events. He manages to achieve this by using recollection of events throughout the book (Bloom, 42).

O'Brien also presents the seductive allure of war in this story. He shows how war makes men primal versions of themselves, less human and killing machines. It is this idea that makes O'Brien refers to the men of Alpha Company as animal-like. Symbolism is also used widely within this story to present facts about the war (Anisfield, 168).

I found the story "The Things they Carried" extremely intriguing and easy to read. The use of narration, humor and confusion all contributed to the story's allure. Rather than make the story unreadable, the use of confusion helped me to think critically about the difference between what is real and what is not real. The story also contributed to my understanding of literary devices such as symbolism, metafiction, and repetition. I was fascinated by the fact that the story did not actually give account of the war itself. Rather, it focused on the lives of the Alpha Company to give us a glimpse of what it was like to participate in the war. The account of the virtual and literal things that the soldiers carried helps us understand them on a personal level. By the end of the story, I was able to relate to each of the Alpha men and understand their situations.

Works Cited

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