

The things they
carried (theme)



As stated in Tim O'Brien's masterpiece *The Things They Carried*, "a true war story is never about war" (O'Brien 85). One can correlate multiple themes uniquely to each death in the novel. However, the deeper meaning O'Brien is trying to convey is the importance of keeping people alive through storytelling.

This is most extensively shown in Timmy's experience of Linda's death. Unlike nearly all of the other deaths in the novel, Linda's death has nothing to do with the Vietnam War. Her death was not a result of a surprise attack. She did not die in combat nor was she strapped with a .45 caliber pistol. Because of this, Linda's death is the most important when noting the underlying message of the novel. O'Brien is showing that although he is using the Vietnam War to give insights about life, *The Things They Carried* is not about an actual war. He uses the aspects of the Vietnam War as a vehicle representing a deeper meaning. This also includes the numerous and sporadic deaths that O'Brien specifically connects to the Vietnam War.

All of these deaths represent a deeper meaning about the importance of keeping people alive through stories that are shared. As shown in *The Things They Carried*, death is a common occurrence during the Vietnam War. The only promise these men have of survival is found in storytelling. Although this theme of storytelling applies to all deaths throughout the novel, it is developed most clearly in Linda's death. Tim O'Brien writes about his experience with Linda's death as a young boy named Timmy. Although

Timmy and Linda are only nine years old, Tim describes them as being truly in love.

This love, along with their childhood, represents innocence. When Linda dies of cancer, Timmy experiences death for the first time and simultaneously loses his innocence. He is no longer just a child. Timmy often dreams about Linda. He creates dialogue in his head about the things she might say to him. He talks about her and to her as though she is still alive. He even writes stories about her, creating scenes of them together. Linda's death becomes the first tragedy Timmy will have to carry throughout his entire life.

For Timmy, storytelling begins as simple coping mechanisms. This gradually transitions to a way of keeping Linda alive and ultimately a way of saving himself. Through Timmy's storytelling, O'Brien illustrates how he succeeds in keeping Linda alive. The fact is Linda is dead. However, Timmy (and Tim) can preserve the life and memory of Linda through his storytelling.

O'Brien uses Linda's death to illustrate that his recollection of war stories and death that are interspersed throughout the novel are not just meant to show what it is like to be in a war but illuminate how he uses storytelling to keep people alive. As a result, he is also saving himself. I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story (O'Brien 246). If we define our lives as an accumulation of past relationships with people we have met, then storytelling can immortalize all of those who have been significant to us.

Through this immortality we are able to save ourselves simply with a story.