

The heaviness of things: comparing the things they carried with janus essay examp...

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Memory is both a burden and a gift to humanity. Without memory, humans would have a much more difficult time connecting on any level with their fellow man; however, the burden of memories can be heavy for many, as well. When traumatic events in life occur, it can be human nature to want to forget them to try to escape the pain; however, truly forgetting is difficult and people have the tendency to carry these traumas throughout their lives. In both *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and "Janus" by Ann Beattie, the main characters are burdened by the things in their lives. The authors utilize the thematic idea of burdens to different ends, but both are concerned with the heaviness of the things that the characters in their stories carry throughout the texts.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien weaves a story that is not quite fiction, but not quite non-fiction either-- parts of the work are autobiographical, while other pieces are fictional. One of the main thematic ideas that O'Brien addresses throughout the piece is the issue of the burdens that a soldier carries. One of the burdens that O'Brien's narrator believes to be the heaviest is the burden of the truth. "A true war story is never moral," he writes. "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (O'Brien). Here, O'Brien's narrator seems to imply that there are lies told about war, lies that are told

to comfort those who have never experienced the realities of war. These lies are, perhaps, created for a variety of different reasons; however, he wants the reader to know the truth, however harsh and cold the truth may be. The soldier knows the truth about war, the narrator implies, and the reader has the responsibility to the soldier for all the sacrifices that he or she has made to understand the harsh realities of war, absent the many candy-coated stories that are told about what happens during war.

The idea of truth being a burden is a theme that O'Brien weaves throughout his piece. It is even built directly into the structure of the work: the reader does not know whether the narrator is O'Brien's own voice, or whether it is a fictional character designed to give a voice to some of O'Brien's feelings about his experiences. O'Brien's characters are soldiers, so they spend much of the text carrying around their equipment through the jungles of Vietnam. However, there are certain things that they carry that are not necessary; O'Brien writes: They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment" (O'Brien). This is man's greatest strength and greatest weakness, simultaneously; man's pride is strong enough to fight and die for his country, but it is also strong enough to cause him to fight and die to avoid embarrassment.

The fear that soldiers carry is a necessary fear. During war, death is always just around the corner, lying in wait in every bush. Fear of death is a necessary burden to carry, but what about the burdens that remain after the

war is over? Should a soldier continue to carry that burden of fear, compounded with the burden of guilt, long after he has left the war zone? Soldiers do carry war with them after they leave a war zone; this much is clear. Many soldiers have a very difficult time adapting to civilian life, and some come home completely changed by their experiences at war. O'Brien notes that the burdens of extraordinary experiences-- particularly violent, evil experiences like those of war-- change people. He writes about how he has become "mean inside," directly as a result of these experiences; one of the burdens that his narrator carries throughout the text is the burden of this newfound meanness that has grown in place of his former kindness.

The soldiers in *The Things They Carried* are all carrying physical things throughout the jungle in Vietnam, but the physical things they are carrying are merely symbolic of the inner burdens that they bear. Some bear only the necessities-- the fear of death, for instance, or the misery of missing loved ones. Others carry extra burdens; they pick them up as they go along, carrying the extra weight as far as they can before they eventually collapse under it.

"The past is just a story," Chuck Palahniuk writes, "and once you realize this it has no power over you" (Goodreads). Palahniuk strikes at the heart of the issue: the soldiers that O'Brien writes about so extensively do not have the ability to let their past become a story. Instead, they carry it, as they did their equipment, through their lives, struggling psychologically under the weight of their memories.

O'Brien wrote extensively about the extraordinary experiences of man in times of war. Ann Beattie, on the other hand, wrote a story about the most

average, mundane lifestyle: her protagonist, Andrea, is a successful real estate agent. Andrea has achieved the life she thought she always wanted, but continues to experience severe ennui throughout the story. She becomes attached to a bowl; this bowl is her burden to carry.

Andrea's interest on the bowl borders on obsession; the bowl, she says, is "meant to be empty" (Beattie). The bowl is representative of her life; it is empty and non-descript, "pretty," as her husband says, but by and large unremarkable. Andrea feels unsatisfied with her life in the years since she became a professional, but she is unsure why she is so unhappy. She admits that she and her husband spend a lot of time purchasing physical things to fill the void in their lives; however, even spending money becomes dull for them, and she feels as though there is nothing that can interest her in her life anymore.

Andrea's problems, in many ways, are the opposite of the problems that the soldiers in O'Brien's work face. They face the reality of life and death every day, whereas Andrea faces down the mundane minutiae of daily life in the modern world. Andrea chooses her burdens to carry because her life is otherwise so empty-- but she does, indeed, still have burdens.

The bowl becomes Andrea's obsession because she cannot fathom how her life-- the ideal life, by all modern standards-- can be so empty. Beattie writes:

Once - she could not imagine how - she left it behind, and then she was so afraid that something might have happened to it that she rushed back to the house and sighed with relief when the woman owner opened the door

Andrea explained - she had purchased a bowl and set it on the chest for

safekeeping while she toured the house with the prospective buyers, and she felt like rushing past the frowning woman and seizing her bowl she realized that the owner must have just seen that it had been perfectly placed, that the sunlight struck the bluer part of it. Her pitcher had been moved to the far side of the chest, and the bowl predominated. (Beattie). Even though Andrea is obsessed with the bowl and it becomes her burden to carry, she still manages to forget it; she is so overcome by the mundane aspects of her day-to-day life that she cannot keep focus on anything. Other people can see her obsession for what it is, and can see it taking over her life and her reality, but instead of recognizing this, Andrea becomes sucked deeper and deeper into her obsession and the reality that she associates only with the bowl.

Both O'Brien and Beattie have a singular message about the burdens that people have: everyone has burdens to carry, but everyone chooses the burdens that they carry. Guilt, fear, or obsessive emptiness-- these are all a part of the human condition, but they need not be the entirety of the human experience, as many of the characters in *The Things They Carried* and "Janus" make them out to be.

The idea that everyone is carrying burdens that they may not be able to bear is a sad one, and it elicits sympathy in the reader for his or her fellow human beings. However, one of the reasons that both Beattie and O'Brien utilized this theme throughout their respective works is to reach out to the reader for help. Burdens are easier to bear when they are shared; O'Brien, for instance, wrote *The Things They Carried* as a way to plead with the American people to share the burden of the Vietnam War as a piece of America's collective

history. Beattie, on the other hand, asks her readership to share the burden of loneliness by reaching out to her readers for collective understanding. Both Beattie and O'Brien understand, instinctually, that burdens carried alone are heavy and can tear down the individual; that same burden carried collectively, however, can be lightened enough to be bearable. Perhaps one of the biggest ironies of the human experience is the feeling that the individual is unique in his or her feelings; in reality, any feeling or experience the individual has is probably shared by any number of people. By encouraging the shared carrying of burdens, Beattie and O'Brien are encouraging their readers to share their humanity and to better both themselves and their fellow man.

Works cited

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