

"the things they carried" analysis essay sample

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“ The Things They Carried” Analysis Essay Sample

The short story “ The Things They Carried” was published in 1990 as a reflection on the events that took place during the Vietnam War. The story vividly describes emotional and psychological experience of soldiers, grievances and hardship faced by young men during the war. Thesis A concentrated emotional impact on the reader is achieved through a “ pre-established design” of the elements which help O’Brien skillfully portray casualties of war-time underlining the evolution of characters, their emotional state, caused by sufferings and enormous psychological burden carried by soldiers.

The descriptive style of O’Brien reflects unique psychological struggles of the main characters, their grievances and sufferings. From the very beginning, the readers are impressed by enormous burden of “ things”. The author goes far beyond a simplistic description given a weight of each thing they carry: “ The weapon weighed 7. 5 pounds unloaded, 8. 2 pounds with its full 20 round magazine.

The riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines...adding on another 8. 4 pounds at minimum, 14 pounds at maximum.” (O’Brien, p. 5). Noise, ugliness, dirt, glare and their variants — are repeated over and over throughout the narrative as the mark of everything the soldiers fear and have tried to keep away. These descriptive elements pre-establish atmosphere of fear and emotional burden through material things the soldiers carry.

O'Brien moves between poles of fragility and stability and exploits linguistic tensions between the narrative and a lack of actions. For all the outward freedom, the soldiers are hardly brave men. These elements concentrate readers' attention and force them to feel with the soldiers and their family members. Even if they do not appear in the short story, the author mentions: "Almost everyone humped photographs" (O'Brien, p. 5). The pre-established design helps the reader to comprehend the meaning of the story through emotional impact and symbolic meaning. Detailed description of ammunition underlines importance of minor themes and symbols which create emotional tension and atmosphere of grief.

The 'pre-established design' shapes the atmosphere of terror and despair. "Grief, terror, love, longing these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight." (O'Brien p. 6). In the rush downwards to the ending, and the tying up of the strands of the plot, killing of Ted Lavender offers a strange respite. But this incident goes further, driving back for a brief space all the negative terms of the story in an impossible dream of renewal and completeness. Also, "pre-established design" involves the rejection of some feelings and the development of others. The readers have to learn to curb, in some situations, displays of disappointment, grief; exultation, etc.

On the other hand, it is possible to disagree with Edgar Poe stating that language means and stylistic devices help O'Brien to create an emotional effect upon the reader. O'Brien's mastery of such details (metaphors, comparison, similes, etc) is consummate. For instance, O'Brien uses a simile

to describe the soldiers: " They moved like mules' (O'Brien, p. 3). On the other hand, language means can be seen as an integral part of the descriptive style and a part of a finely-calculated structure which also underlines the soldiers' transition from passive observers to emotional protagonists. " It was very sad...the things men carried inside." (O'Brien, p. 10).

A " pre-established" design helps O'Brien to shape the atmosphere of the short story and create a certain emotional effect upon the readers. Using stylistic devices, O'Brien supports terrible pangs of remorse and feelings of guilty. It is typical of O'Brien's narrative method to ascribe the young soldiers' view to the physical world rather than to interpret it with the vocabulary of a mature person. Indeed, the author places such poetic moments so selectively in the story that they seem like calm in the generally moving narrative.

References

1. O'Brien, T. The Things They Carried. Broadway, 1998.