

Analysis of a book poem english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Since the dawn of human history, man has always needed a motivational force to accomplish any particular goal he had in mind. Countless maxims suggest that this incentive comes from many different sources. The famous Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu, however, once said, " Shame is fear of humiliation at one's inferior status in the estimation of others." Lao Tzu's words, recorded in " The Book of the Way" compiled by hundreds of his students, are exemplified by the actions of Tim O'Brien in his book " The Things The Carried." Before delving into the means by which O'Brien demonstrated Lao Tzu's words, however, we must first determine the precise meaning of this quote. When commenting on " the inferior status in the estimation of others," Lao Tzu dictates that a man's perception upon himself is based on society's impression on that person. A man is proud when his mark is higher than that of those around him, but when his standing becomes inferior to culture's expectations, he becomes humiliated. Furthermore, the term " fear" in his quote suggests that humans have a natural phobia of humiliation, and will avoid being embarrassed in any way possible. Thus, according to Lao Tzu, the word shame " is the fear of humiliation." Throughout his book, Tim O'Brien recounts many tales of his experiences throughout the Vietnam War. One particular narrative demonstrates the power of the fear of humiliation, and how the firm desire to become socially acceptable can change a man's actions. Curt Lemon was a timid man who was drafted for the Vietnam War. One day, the Army dentist is flown in to check on the man's teeth. As the dentist sets up his tent, the platoon is seated outside. The dentist soon begins calling each soldier into the tent, one by one. Pale and afraid, Lemon claims " Nobody messes with

my teeth." Harassed by his fellow soldiers' curiosity, he admits to having negative experiences with dentists during his high school years. When he is called to enter the tent, however, he obediently complies. Before the dentist even lays a finger on Lemon, he feints. Beleaguered by his colleague's remarks, Lemon later returns to the dentist's tent that evening, insisting on an agonizing toothache. The dentist claimed that there was nothing wrong with Lemon's teeth as he was examining them, but Lemon insisted on having one pulled out. The dentist, giving in, gave Lemon a shot and yanked one tooth out. Lemon delightedly returned to his bunk, showing those around him the gap in his otherwise perfect row of teeth. Curt Lemon's characteristic demonstrates the bravado of the men expected in war. His notion of bravery was clear, and he felt the need to demonstrate his capacity for bravery after he fainted in the dentist's office. Lemon felt shamed around his comrades- if he could not overcome his fear of the dentist, how would he be able to fight a war? He therefore returned to the dentist's office, insisting for a tooth to be removed. Curt believed that this action restored his community's impression upon him. When showing his missing tooth, he displays a proud characteristic, defeating his prior nervous reaction. This example clearly demonstrates a man's desire to be accepted by society. For many, the phobia of denunciation from his or her community can be an extreme motivating force. This idea is also represented in O'Brien's book, in the narrative titled " On the Rainy River." After graduating from college as a summa cum laude, on the summer of 1966, O'Brien receives his draft letter from the government. O'Brien is stunned, unsure of what to think. He spends that summer meatpacking in Minnesota. After work, he spends every night

driving around aimlessly. Even though his community pressures him to go to war, O'Brien ponders whether he should escape to the Canadian border to avoid his draft. Because of the government's refusal to defer in order to attend graduate school, his incompetence to oppose a war he was against, and an inability to claim himself as ill, he realizes that there is no easy way out. He snaps one day. After leaving a short note to his family, he leaves work suddenly and drives off to the Canadian border. There, he meets an elderly landowner named Elroy. The two spend six days together, and on the seventh day, Elroy takes O'Brien to the Raining River to fish. Elroy soon stops the boat near the shoreline of Canada, twenty yards in front of him. Silently, O'Brien tells himself that he will go to war, and yet with the thought of his family and friends in his mind and their disappointment in him if he becomes a refugee in Canada, he breaks into tears and tells Elroy to turn the boat back towards Minnesota. The next morning, O'Brien drives south to his home, then leaves for war shortly after. This story develops around the theme of humiliation as a motivating factor. O'Brien originally had the mindset of refusing to go to war, no matter the cause. Not only was he against the war itself, but he graduated at the top of the class. Believing that he did not deserve to go to war, he devised a plan to escape from America. The fact that his family and community encouraged him to go, however, anchored him to the United States. He questions his own motives, and yet the words of those he knew continued to weigh him down. At his final moment, the one chance he had to escape, the expectations of society and his fear of humiliation turned him back towards the war which he abhorred. Stuyvesant recently captured the front page of the media with its cheating

scandal. As a Stuyvesant Student, I can vouch for its extremely competitive atmosphere. At Stuyvesant, a very commonly found erroneous mentality is that grades define who a person is. High grades are a requirement to becoming accepted in the student body as a " true" Stuyvesant Student. To prevent humiliation, some students in Stuyvesant do everything within their grasp to achieve a higher grade, oftentimes including going against the academic honesty code. This is the power of the fear of shame, of humiliation. Lao Tzu philosophized nearly three thousand years ago what we have only now truly begun to understand. As demonstrated in Curt Lemon's actions, the desire for a human being to be accepted into society is a strong one. Tim O'Brien shows us that truly, shame can be an extremely commanding motivational force, and as demonstrated by some students in Stuyvesant, not always a positive one.