

# Example of the realism of the things they carried essay

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* tells an anthologized story of a platoon of American soldiers throughout the Vietnam conflict, demonstrating just how significant the effect of the war was on everyone who experienced it. Drawing greatly on O'Brien's own experiences as a soldier in Vietnam, the stories are greatly extrapolated from his recollections of being there, though they do not necessarily cover strictly accurate events in the life of O'Brien. Instead, the mood and atmosphere of O'Brien's experiences is projected onto this semi-autobiographical group of characters, creating a stylized world in which people, places and events are highly symbolic, functioning more as an indicator of theme and impact than of strict accuracy to real life events. Perhaps the most accurate analogue to Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* is Lt. Cross, the main character of the titular short story within the novel. Like Cross, O'Brien worked in the Quang Ngai province, where the events of the story took place (Goluboff, 2004). Like O'Brien, the character in the book was also recruited to fight the war after graduating from college. Many youths were recruited in the war against their will. Majority of them hated war but getting involved in it was their nationalistic duty therefore no one could be disloyal to the nation. Because of this connection, and the use of Cross as the perspective character for this story, it can be reasonably assumed that O'Brien's experiences closely mirror those of Cross in "The Things They Carried." In the story, Cross spends the majority of his time clinging to letters from Martha, a girl he likes (but who does not return his affections): "They were signed Love, Martha, but Lieutenant Cross understood that Love was only a way of signing and did not mean what he sometimes pretended it meant" (O'Brien 2). Despite this knowledge, Cross

chooses to pretend that they have a future together, and clings to the idea that they are an item in order to give him something to emotionally tie him to sanity. While this helps him get through the horrors of Vietnam, it also allows him to ignore his duties and get Tim Lavender, one of his fellow soldiers, killed. To that end, Cross realizes that he must give up this attachment to Martha in order to protect the people who are right in front of him.

Other characters in O'Brien's book do closely mirror aspects of his real life experiences in Vietnam. The chapters titled " Ambush" and " The Man I Killed" are fictional, but O'Brien wrote them to confront his guilt over those he killed with grenades while in My Khe village. While at war, he had accidentally killed a victim who was been in the wrong place at the wrong time but the guilt remained with him even after he left the war. O'Brien explains that he has not finished sorting the experience of the sound of grenades at war and how he felt about killing.

Cross' infatuation with Martha (and his fantasy of her) not matching up to reality lends a metafictional aspect to this story and the others in *The Things They Carried*. These are stories written by a man who served in Vietnam, about Vietnam itself - to that end, there is a certain expectation for realism and autobiography. However, because of the necessities of literature and the allure of drama, the stories themselves occupy a strange place between fiction and reality where O'Brien exaggerates or abstracts the details of these stories to sell his larger points about Vietnam's horrifying nature. O'Brien's stream of consciousness prose features constant reminders that these are stories that are being told, thus making many of these narrators

unreliable. Many of the stories start or end with the narrator announcing that they are going to tell a story, preparing the reader for the fact that these stories will not be strictly true.

Perhaps the most challenging story for this blurring of fiction and reality is “How to Tell a True War Story,” which tells the same story from multiple perspectives, further obfuscating the nature of what is true. The story itself starts off by telling you “This is a true story,” a declaration so direct as to be immediately suspicious (50). After that, we read the story of Rat Kiley, who writes a letter to his friend’s sister talking about the man’s many virtues and accolades, calling him Rat’s “best friend in the world” (51). However, when the sister does not write back, he calls her a “dumb cooze” and just lets the story go (51). This sudden change and shift in mood evinces O’Brien’s declaration that “a true war story is never moral”; since O’Brien is writing literature, which inevitably conveys messages and themes about the human condition, some element of untruthfulness and deceit is necessary (51). Therefore, a moral war story is never true; however, it is effective, dramatic, and literary. Meanwhile, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” shows fresh-faced Mary Ann arriving in Vietnam, only to lose her innocence by performing adultery and putting on a necklace of Viet Cong tongues. These events and more show the dehumanizing effect of war on the individual, which is O’Brien’s chief concern in the book.

The stories being told in *The Things They Carried* showcase Vietnam that does not offer its characters any real quarter or relief, dehumanizing soldiers and turning them into monsters. The innocent men who enter the conflict are turned into hypocritical, stuttering babies who barely know each other

except for the possessions they have. When Tim Lavender dies, for example, all the other soldiers can do is divide up his stuff, smoke his weed and talk about him in relation to his possessions. O'Brien and the soldiers carried with them all the emotional baggage of the men who might die (O'Brien 20). He also states that " Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to (O'Brien 20)." O'Brien also explains that though war might be hell, there were several contradictory feelings that came with it. He explains that they experienced a mysterious feeling of remaining alive after a firefight.

The Things They Carried is rightfully more concerned with creating good stories than painting an autobiographical account of O'Brien's experiences in Vietnam. Historians, political scientists and interested persons can never truly know what to believe without first-hand evidence, which is usually presented through quantitative and qualitative data, instead of narrative prose and poetry as Tim O'Brien does in The Things They Carried. As he writes in one of the chapters, " Stories are for joining the past to the future"; to that end, O'Brien illustrates the significance that these stories provide to anyone interested in Vietnam history, providing feelings and messages instead of historical facts and details (33). Throughout the novel, O'Brien uses these short stories to paint a picture of Vietnam that is ruthless, inescapable, and having dramatic effects on the people forced to be there (which they cannot escape when they come back). This theme and mood is more important than any truth, especially since O'Brien is writing fiction; individual truth is shown to be conveyed through perspective, our view of the world being heavily informed by what has come before.

## **Works Cited**

Goluboff, B. "Tim O'Brien's Quang Ngai." ANQ 17(2) (2004): 53-58.

O'Brien, T. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin, 1990. Print.