

Role of symbols in the things they carried essay sample

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Symbolism in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* runs rampant and plays a part in conveying the author's message. O'Brien uses symbols to link ideas together. Symbols can be decrypted by the reader to unearth the true essence of the work. Symbols appear in all forms in the work, recurring as both tangible and intangible. O'Brien chooses to embed symbols everywhere in the text, in the structure, the characters. Some symbols are more discreetly hidden than others, and some are out in the open and should be able to be picked up by a competent reader. The role of symbols in *The Things They Carried* is to show hidden messages, address the theme of the whole work, engage the reader in reading, and expose the fictionality of the work. An important symbol early in the story is the weight of the things they carried. In the first chapter, "The Things They Carried". O'Brien continuously repeats the exact weight of various necessities. Eventually, he shifts from tangible, physical objects, to intangible, psychological burdens. O'Brien utilizes a much more sober and melancholy tone when discussing the psychological weight. "They carried the land itself - Vietnam, the place, the soil, a powdery orange-red dust.... They carried the sky, the whole atmosphere, they carried it." (O'Brien 14). O'Brien writes about how foreign the place was for Alpha Company. It is significant that the land was not carrying them, but rather that they were carrying the land.

The terrain and atmosphere was so foreign to them that they mentally fought a constant conflict with it. The awesome magnitude of the other intangible burdens shows an important underlying message. The soldiers in Vietnam fought a conflict in their own minds that was several bounds higher than the physical conflict that one would typically expect from a war. This

whole message was given through the symbol of weight. Another symbol that plays an indispensable role in *The Things They Carried* is “sharp grey eyes” (O’Brien 67). Three characters in the work have gray eyes. Martha, Elroy Berdahl, and Curt Lemon. All three of these characters’ existences can be called into question. It is very plausible that these characters are not actual, objective people, but rather meta-fictional devices used by O’Brien to invoke sensation in the reader. If so, the grey eyes play a role in signaling this. If the reader discovers this symbol, they can piece together the fictionality of these characters, and ultimately to the meta-fictional nature of the entire work.

A very prominent symbol in the work is the ever-present conflict, but closeness, between war and love. O’Brien uses this symbol frequently and ubiquitously throughout the novel, by entwining it with the structure of the book itself. He repeatedly combines his war stories with his love stories, and in doing so, removes the clear distinction between the two. He will start the chapter talking about death in war, and then in the same chapter reminisce about love. For example, when Ted Lavender died, Jimmy Cross started thinking about Martha. During Rat Kiley’s tale about Mark Fossie, when Mark Fossie is deployed in a war, he brings his girlfriend, his love into his war. She eventually begins to wear camouflage and face paint. She blends into the war. She becomes so caught up in the fight that it becomes impossible to distinguish her from the war. She appears again, but only briefly so. When Timmy and Linda go on their date together, they see a war movie, establishing a connection between the two. It is through this symbol that

O'Brien conveys the theme and purpose of *The Things They Carried*, that love and war may be opposites, but in essence, they are one and the same. An example of a character as a symbol is Kathleen. She represents the reader.

Like the reader, O'Brien also tells her his stories. When deciding how he should explain the whole experience to her, he edits the story. He engages in the same process with the reader. O'Brien expresses through her character the frustration that he feels. He can't convey his message thoroughly, because the reader won't understand the full resonance of what he felt, just as Kathleen doesn't. Kathleen says "I don't even know what. It smells rotten". This is what the reader feels, distrust in the story. O'Brien's purpose in using this symbol is to convey to the reader the reason why he sometimes adds or subtracts from stories. He wants the reader to recognize this and truly grasp the full experience of Vietnam. Another symbol in the work is Elroy Berdahl. Berdahl in the book is placed to be a human representation of God. This of course is an interpretation, but it can be assumed that this was O'Brien's intent because of this quote. "He was the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them." (O'Brien 57). The juxtaposition of Berdahl and God leads to the belief that they are the same. If Berdahl truly is God, then it is significant that he remains so silent and simply watches peacefully. What this represents, is that God truly did not play a role in O'Brien's decision to go to war, and by association, the events of the war.

He uses this to put as much distance between God and the novel as he can. This was achieved only by creating a human symbol of God, Elroy Berdahl. Yet another symbol employed by O'Brien is Linda. Linda is a tool that O'Brien uses to consociate the ideas of love, war, memory, and death. The fact that Timmy is 9 years old in the chapter "The Lives of the Dead" shows that O'Brien's maturity level has no difference between when he was 9 and when he was at war. The love that O'Brien felt toward Linda is so innocent, and then she dies so suddenly. But O'Brien does not stop loving her, rather the contrarian effect happens, and he starts loving Linda even more. His love is enhanced greatly by memory. Linda convinces him to stop mourning the dead, and cherish their memories. This is what enables O'Brien to go to Vietnam. On their date, they go to view a war movie, and Linda smiles in the face of death. When Linda dies, she tells him that Death does not matter. Her body is gone, but her soul will live on. O'Brien applies the lessons learned from Linda to his experiences in Vietnam. "In Vietnam, too, we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead. Shaking hands, that was one way. By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was." (O'Brien 225).

Linda is the reason that O'Brien has written the novel. He says "We kept the dead alive with stories." (O'Brien 226). That is what he does for Linda, as well as for the rest of his fallen comrades in Alpha Company. Nearing the end of the work, O'Brien relates Linda to the rest of the work. "She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was... I loved her and then she died. And yet right

here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice... I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy..."(O'Brien 232). O'Brien is keeping the dead alive through stories. And thus is revealed the true purpose of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien writes the work to save the lives of his fallen soldiers, Linda, and himself. He hopes that by writing the novel, exactly as his memories describe, he can immortalize everyone he writes about, especially Timmy, who was lost in the war.

The use of symbolism in *The Things They Carried* is present in many forms. The frequency of symbolism in the work indicates a deliberate attempt by O'Brien to portray a greater meaning through them. Each symbol is used to portray a piece of O'Brien's message, and this becomes a crux of the theme as a whole. O'Brien uses symbolism embedded throughout the novel to bring attention to important literary elements and the purpose of his entire work.