INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried (1990) is considered one of the finest books about the Vietnam War. Far from a combat story of pride and glory, it is a compassionate tale of the American soldier, brimming with raw honesty and thoughtful reflection.

The book’s narrator follows a platoon of infantrymen through the jungles of Vietnam. We see them trudge through the muck of a constant downpour, get hit by sniper fire, pull body parts out of a tree, laugh while they tell their stories to each other, and fall silent when faced with making sense of it all—both in the moment and twenty years later.

The book is split into a lush mosaic of vignettes drawn from O’Brien’s own experiences. The title story describes what the soldiers must lug with them—both literally and figuratively—as they march: food, canteens, flak jackets, and weapons, as well as grief, terror, secrets, and memories.

In another story, O’Brien tells of a young medic who brings his high-school sweetheart to his aid station in the mountains of Vietnam, chronicling her transformation from an innocent girl in a pink sweater to a cold night stalker who dons a necklace of human tongues. Yet another story tells of a soldier back from the war who drives his Chevy around his Iowa hometown, struggling to find meaning in his new life.

Central to the book is O’Brien’s unique style, which blurs the lines between fact and fiction, then examines how and why he does just that. O’Brien challenges readers to ponder larger philosophical questions about truth and memory, and brings the reader closer to the emotional core of the men’s experiences. “For the common soldier,” O’Brien writes in “How to Tell a True War Story,” “war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true.”

The Things They Carried is not just a tale of war, and the book’s themes are no less relevant today than they were decades ago. This award-winning work is a brutal, sometimes funny, often profound narrative about the human heart—how it fares under pressure and what it can endure. You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever.

—Tim O’Brien, from The Things They Carried
MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tim O'Brien
Is the narrator who never wanted to fight in the Vietnam War and remains haunted by memories even 20 years after he returns to America.

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross
Is a solitary, pensive platoon leader who cares about his men. He carries photos and letters from the girl he loves back home in New Jersey, who doesn't love him back.

Bob "Rat" Kiley
Is a likeable and skilled medic who braves danger to keep his fellow soldiers alive. He carries comic books, brandy, and M&Ms.

Kiowa
Is a kind and moral soldier from Oklahoma, a Native American, a devout Baptist. He carries an illustrated New Testament, worn-out moccasins, and his grandfather's feathered hunting hatchet.

Norman Bowker
Is a quiet boy from Central Iowa who strives to live up to his father's expectations and finds he can't relate to anyone back home after the war. He carries a diary and a thumb cut from a Viet Cong corpse.

Henry Dobbins
Is a large, strong, dependable, unsophisticated machine gunner. He carries extra rations and wears his girlfriend's pantyhose tied around his neck.

They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

—Tim O'Brien, from The Things They Carried
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF TIM O'BRIEN

1940s
World War II ends, 1945.
Tim O'Brien is born on October 1, 1946.
With The Naked and the Dead, Norman Mailer sets a new standard for American writers about war, 1948.

1950s
Dwight D. Eisenhower is inaugurated U.S. president, 1953, heralding a period of economic prosperity.
The French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. French Indochina is partitioned into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam.

1960s
An incident between North Vietnamese and U.S. battleships in the Gulf of Tonkin prompts President Johnson to order the first U.S. airstrikes against North Vietnam, August 1964.
The first U.S. combat troops are sent to Vietnam, March 1965.
Nearly 100,000 people march in Washington, D.C., to protest the war, October 1967.
O'Brien graduates from college and is drafted into the army, 1968.

1970s
O'Brien is sent home with a Purple Heart and the rank of sergeant, 1970.
President Nixon resigns over Watergate scandal, 1974.
Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, ending the Vietnam War, April 1975.

1980s
The Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees receives the Nobel Peace Prize for aiding the escape of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese "boat people," 1981.
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall is completed in Washington, D.C., 1982.

1990s
O'Brien publishes The Things They Carried, 1990.

2000s
The U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement goes into effect, opening the American market to Vietnamese goods, December 2001.
THE VIETNAM WAR

The Vietnam War was one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounding more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly four million soldiers and civilians—roughly 10% of the population.

In 1959, North and South Vietnam were divided along what is known as the "17th parallel." The North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front sought to unify the country under Communist rule; the South Vietnamese army struggled to maintain independence. In 1964, the U.S. Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to take steps "to prevent further aggression" and keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing, or as Woodrow Wilson once pledged, to "make the world safe for democracy."

In 1965, the U.S. sent ground troops to South Vietnam and began a series of bombing missions over North Vietnam called Operation Rolling Thunder. Densely forested countryside prevented the effective use of tanks, provided cover for guerrilla fighters and medical evacuations, and allowed helicopters to transport troops and supplies. By the end of 1966, the U.S. had nearly 400,000 troops fighting in Vietnam; by the start of 1969, the draft was in full force and that number had increased to 540,000.

In mid-1969, strategies shifted as it became more evident to American soldiers, politicians, and citizens that the U.S. efforts in Vietnam were not prevailing. Newly elected President Richard Nixon responded by withdrawing 25,000 troops.

Unlike in World War II, there was no front in Vietnam, the danger was pervasive and unrelenting, and the most common measure of "success" was counting the dead bodies of the enemy. The average age of U.S. service members in Vietnam was 19, seven years younger than in WWII, making soldiers even more susceptible to psychological strain.

Although the war claimed countless Vietnamese civilian casualties, Americans were shocked when they learned about an incident that occurred in March of 1968. In what is known as the My Lai Massacre, members of a U.S. infantry company slaughtered more than 300 Vietnamese villagers, including women, elderly men, children, and infants. As news of this incident and other failures of the war broke in Western publications, the American peace movement gained momentum.

Large antiwar protests spread across America. The morale among troops—particularly those coming home from the war to a country with little empathy for what they had experienced—was low. Suicide, alcoholism, divorce, and unemployment were more rampant among veterans of Vietnam than of any other war in U.S. history until then.

In January 1973, the warring governments signed a peace accord, ending open hostilities between North Vietnam and the U.S. However, the conflict between Vietnamese forces continued until the fall of Saigon in South Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

The complexity of the struggle and the reasons for America's involvement are still widely debated. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is the most famous tribute to the war. Designed by Maya Ying Lin and constructed in 1982, the memorial is a stark black granite wall with the names engraved of American service members killed and missing in the war.
TIM O’BRIEN (B. 1946)

Before Tim O’Brien was drafted into the army, he had what some would consider an all-American childhood. He was born on October 1, 1946, in Austin, Minnesota, and raised in Worthington, a small prairie town in the southern part of the state. His mother was an elementary school teacher, his father an insurance salesman and sailor in World War II. O’Brien played Little League, dabbled in magic tricks, and spent much of his youth in the county library daydreaming about such characters as Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

At Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, he received good grades and became student body president. Occasionally, he’d attend peace vigils and protests against the burgeoning war in Vietnam. He graduated in 1968 with a B.A. in political science and thought of becoming a writer, inspired in part by his father’s personal accounts of two World War II battles, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, published in The New York Times. Then O’Brien got his draft notice. He once recalled in an interview that "even getting on the plane for boot camp, I couldn’t believe any of it was happening to me, someone who hated Boy Scouts and bugs and rifles."

O’Brien spent his tour of duty from 1969 to 1970 as a foot soldier with the 46th Infantry in Quang Ngai province. For some of that time he was stationed in My Lai, just one year after the infamous My Lai Massacre. He was sent home with a Purple Heart when he got hit with shrapnel in a grenade attack.

His first writing about his war experiences came in the form of a memoir called If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home, published in 1973 during his graduate studies in government at Harvard University. Soon after, he took a position for a year as a national affairs reporter for The Washington Post, then turned full-time to writing books.

O’Brien published The Things They Carried in 1990. His many accolades include a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Book Award, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He nearly stopped writing after his sixth book, In the Lake of the Woods (1994), due to a battle with depression. But following a nine-month hiatus, he began work on a new novel, Tomcat in Love, published in 1998. He currently teaches creative writing at Texas State University.

As a fiction writer, I do not write just about the world we live in, but I also write about the world we ought to live in, and could, which is a world of imagination.

—Tim O’Brien
AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM O'BRIEN

On November 13, 2008, Josephine Reed, Managing Audio Producer at the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Tim O'Brien. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: What is The Things They Carried about?
Tim O'Brien: It's a book that centers on Vietnam and a platoon of soldiers. In one sense, it's about the Vietnam War, but it's also about storytelling, how stories rule our lives, how they're told and retold as we look for an elusive truth. And finally, it's about writing itself—writing as an effort to pin down with language the truth about a subject.

JR: What is the distinction between truth and accuracy?
TO: What we see accurately with our eyes can sometimes be very deceptive. We don't see everything. No historian can fit into a textbook the thoughts of every single soldier in every single war and every single episode. Much is being selected and generalized. So in The Things They Carried, I'm trying to get at this sense of how difficult it is to pin down the truth with a capital "T." In a way, it's a warning against absolutism, against black and white declarations of what's true and what's not true. So part of the effort is trying to display through fiction the ambiguous, blurry, complicated, grayish fog of even the most plainly historical events.

JR: I was profoundly moved by the story "On the Rainy River," not only by the character of Tim, but also the old man, Elroy. He seemed as real to me as the man sitting next to me on the train this morning.
TO: That's an example of what imagination can do. He's an imagined character—more so, even, than the Tim O'Brien character, who is also, I must say, imagined. But the old guy is made up out of the whole cloth. And yet, he represents something real that you couldn't put your finger on, which has to do with conscience, or being watched by, say, a dead father—that feeling of someone there with you who's not offering advice but is simply present as a kind of moral witness. Old Elroy is meant to stand for a whole bunch of things: my dad, my mom, my country, God, and conscience, all together.

JR: I'd also like to talk about your story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." It reminded me very much of Heart of Darkness.
TO: Yes, it was intentionally structured to be the other hemisphere of Heart of Darkness. Because Kurtz is a man, because Marlow's a man, and because virtually every character in the story is a man, the whole structure of my story is meant to be a female flip of it. In a way, I was trying to put a woman in a man's boots and see if she behaves much differently or feels other things than a man might feel. In a way the point of the story (if stories ever have "points"—and of course they don't, or maybe they have a trillion angles on a point) has to do with the image of the woman as nurturer and peaceful and incapable of the conspicuously violent behaviors of men—which, of course, when you look at history, is totally ridiculous. So the story is meant to be inclusive of women in almost all war stories.

JR: You structured this book in such an interesting way. Each individual story is like a small gem, like a pearl necklace. But when you string them together, the cumulative effect is powerful.
TO: That's my goal. I wanted to have self-contained stories that I think all chapters of books ought to be anyway. Yet I wanted each story to receive the light of other stories, the way it would in a necklace. Or one gemstone would receive the light of the ruby next to it. Although they are meant to stand alone, it seems to me that in the end, you aim ambitiously for what all writers worth their salt aim at—of making a book of art, of some sort. And that's the sense of pieces being in position, so that they can reflect. So that the pieces are capable of not just reflecting, but absorbing the light of the others.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The narrator of *The Things They Carried* has the same name as the book’s author. How did this affect your response to the book?

2. In the title story, how do the things the men carry help define them as individuals? What are some of the more interesting items? Which "things" were unexpected? What would you carry if you went to war?

3. At the end of "On the Rainy River," the narrator says, "I was a coward. I went to the war." What does he mean by this? Do you agree?

4. In "How to Tell a True War Story," what does the narrator say on this subject? What do you think makes a true war story?

5. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what causes the transformation in Mary Anne Bell? How does Rat Kiley’s telling of the story add to the tension? What does the story say about the Vietnam experience?

6. In "Speaking of Courage," the narrator says, "Sometimes the bravest thing on earth was to sit through the night and feel the cold in your bones. Courage was not always a matter of yes or no." How does the narrator define courage? How do you define it?

7. In "Good Form," the narrator says, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." What does he mean by "story truth" and "happening-truth"? Why might one be "truer" than the other?

8. The narrator of the story "The Ghost Soldiers" says, "When you’re afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world." What might he mean by this?

9. Even though *The Things They Carried* is set during the Vietnam War, in what ways is it relevant today, with regard to war and politics as well as our personal struggles?
DAY ONE
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand the reader’s understanding of a work of fiction. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. In this lesson, explore the author’s life to understand the book more fully.

Tim O’Brien grew up in small-town Minnesota and describes himself as a dreamer, not big enough to compete in sports, who made good grades and loved magic tricks. In 1968, he was drafted into the Army’s 46th Infantry and sent to Vietnam. Though politically he was against the war, O’Brien served as a foot soldier in the Quang Ngai province from 1969 until 1970, when he was hit by shrapnel from a hand grenade, earning the Purple Heart and a ticket home.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide.

Read assigned essay within your small group and present what you learned to the rest of the class.

• “Introduction to the Book”
• “Major Characters”
• “Tim O’Brien (b. 1946)”

Fiction writers are often advised to “write what you know.” Tim O’Brien followed this advice by reflecting on personal experiences and adapting them to create a work of fiction.

• What are the differences between fiction and nonfiction?
• How might real-life events evolve into a fictional story?
• Is it okay for fiction to have elements of “real” events?
• Is it acceptable for a nonfiction writer to create moments that never occurred to help expand or explain the story?
• Are the standards for “truthfulness” in fiction different from those for nonfiction? Why or why not?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a three-paragraph essay on an object you carry now, or one from your childhood. Describe the object in detail, the mood it evokes, and reasons for its importance.

HOMEWORK

1. Read Handout One: Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction and “The Things They Carried” (pp. 1-26).
2. Make a list of the soldiers and the special items they carried.
TIPS ON READING A COLLECTION OF LINKED SHORT FICTION

A critical success since its publication in 1990, *The Things They Carried* is considered one of the most valuable contributions to Vietnam War literature. Readers often disagree on the genre of the book. It is sometimes regarded as a group of interconnected short stories instead of a novel. Certainly each story—or chapter—stands alone successfully. Several of the stories were originally published in such magazines as Esquire, The Massachusetts Review, Playboy, and Gentleman’s Quarterly. Yet the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

*The Things They Carried* is told mainly from the first-person point of view of a narrator named Tim O’Brien who shares many of the same experiences as the author. There are two stories in the book that are not told from this perspective. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to alter the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers should ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam. Readers should be aware of changes in setting and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

O’Brien uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *The Things They Carried*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story’s meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it’s important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way the Vietnam War affects the soldiers in Alpha Company.
DAY TWO
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the book. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

_The Things They Carried_ was published in 1990, twenty years after Tim O’Brien returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam. By most estimates nearly 9 million men served in the military between 1964 and 1975. Of that number, approximately 3.5 million men served in the Vietnam theatre of operations. The draft called more than 2 million men for military service during the Vietnam era. It has also been credited with “encouraging” many volunteers to join the armed services rather than risk being drafted into combat.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Read Handout Two: Conscription and the U.S. Draft and the Reader’s Guide essay “The Vietnam War” (pp. 7-9).

What are the pros and cons of instituting a draft during a time of national crisis?

Create a group list of the items that they carried.

• Which, if any, of the items is specific to the time period of the Vietnam War?
• Which items are timeless?
• Why might Tim O’Brien choose to give each man specific items in addition to the typical soldier’s gear? What do the items tell us about each soldier’s duties and personality?
• What do we learn about their hopes and desires?

WRITING EXERCISE

Imagine that you are going to war and can only take three personal items. Write a short essay describing each item and the reason why you want to carry it.

HOMEWORK

1. Read “Love,” “Spin,” and “On the Rainy River” (pp. 27-61).
2. Choose your favorite of the three stories and write a one-paragraph synopsis.
3. Think about the ways memory unites these stories.
CONSCRIPTION AND THE U.S. DRAFT

Although the United States Constitution does not directly mention the word “draft” (or even the older term—“conscription”), it does give Congress certain power. Article I, Section 8, states that Congress shall have the power to declare war; raise and support armies; maintain a navy; and provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining a militia.

In both peacetime and periods of conflict, men have been drafted to fill specific needs in our country’s armed forces. The draft in the United States is administered by the Selective Service System. On September 16, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act, which created the country’s first peacetime draft and formally established the agency. Even today, men ages 18 through 25 are required to register with the Selective Service. This provides a way for Congress to fill vacancies in the armed forces which cannot be filled through voluntary means.

During the Vietnam War, there were not enough volunteers to staff the military. A lottery was held on December 1, 1969, to determine the order of call for men of draft age. Three-hundred-sixty-six capsules containing birth dates were placed in a large glass container and drawn by hand to establish the order in which men would be drafted. The first birth date was assigned the number 1, meaning the men with that birth date would be called first. The drawing continued until all days of the year had been paired with numbers. Families across the country hoped their young men would get a high number.

Conscription has always been controversial, but during the Vietnam War draft evasion and resistance reached levels that hampered the war effort and ultimately helped end the conflict. Many draft resisters filed for conscientious objector status. A conscientious objector can declare that military service or combat duty is counter to his religious or moral beliefs, but must be able to demonstrate that the objection is long-lasting and sincere.

Some men facing the draft fled to Canada. As antiwar protests took hold on college campuses, students began burning their draft cards as acts of defiance. Though resisting the draft can carry stiff fines and even prison sentences, during the Vietnam War there were far too many people to punish.

In 1977, President Carter granted amnesty to all those who had fled abroad in defiance of the draft, allowing them to return to the United States.

Although the U.S. does not currently have an active draft, young men must register so that, should a draft ever be instituted, the Selective Service will have lists of those eligible to serve. Since September 11, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have kept the idea of reinstituting the draft in the public’s mind, but Congress has rejected all bills that call for conscription, and all the troops serving in the U.S. military have enlisted voluntarily.
DAY THREE
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of a work of fiction, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Things They Carried defies many of the categorizations to which readers of literary fiction have become accustomed. Critics debate whether the book is a novel or a collection of short stories. The title page offers no help resolving the dispute, simply declaring the book “a work of fiction.” Similarly, readers often wonder whether the book is mostly memoir, or strictly fiction. Mostly narrated by a first-person narrator whose name is the same as the author’s, the similarities between events that take place in O’Brien’s writing and his life are evident. Yet, however cleverly The Things They Carried incorporates elements of memoir, it remains a work of fiction because the author invented and embellished the stories within its pages. O’Brien has explained in many interviews that he sees little correlation between “truth” in literature and what actually happened. Instead, O’Brien creates stories that lead readers who have not experienced the horrors of war to an understanding of its emotional and physical toll.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

The first story, “The Things They Carried,” is written in the third-person point of view.
• How does this serve to introduce the rest of the book?
• Were you surprised when O’Brien switched to first-person point of view and you realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?

Share your one-paragraph synopses of the stories you read as a homework assignment.
• How does each of the stories deal with O’Brien’s memories of times before, during, or after the war?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short essay discussing the differences between memoir and fiction. You might explore one or more of the following questions: Is it acceptable to invent scenes or dialogue when writing a memoir? Why or why not? Is it all right to add elements of real-life events in fiction writing? If so, must the author let the reader know what is factual, and what is not?

HOMEWORK

1. Read “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist” (pp. 62-88).
2. Identify the protagonist of each story.
DAY FOUR
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

The central character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. The protagonist’s journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a “foil,” has traits that contrast with the protagonist’s and highlight important features of the main character’s personality. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Things They Carried does not follow the narrative arc of a typical novel. Instead, each chapter functions as a separate story that has its own protagonist, setting, and dramatic force. Because the stories are interrelated, O’Brien can weave each of the twenty-two separate chapters together to achieve a unified whole. Though each story has its own main character, it can be argued that the ultimate protagonist of the book is the narrator, Tim O’Brien, who struggles to tell the “truth” about war through extraordinary “acts of remembrance.”

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Discuss the stories “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist” (pp. 62-88). Identify the protagonist and antagonist in each story.

In groups, list the titles of the eight stories you have read so far and the names of the prominent characters from each story.

• Are some characters emerging as the book’s “major” characters while others have a lesser role?
• If so, which characters seem to be the most important and why?

WRITING EXERCISE

In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed... The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (p. 71)

Find an instance where O’Brien’s writing reflects the surreal nature of war and write a short essay on how he achieves this effect. What kinds of truths can surrealism reveal?

HOMEWORK

1. Read “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (pp. 89-116).
2. Identify ways O’Brien uses figurative language such as imagery, simile, and metaphor to enhance the story.
DAY FIVE
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

The story Rat Kiley tells in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is highly implausible.

• Do you feel its lack of believability makes it any less compelling?
• How much of the story seems real?
• Is there a moral to Rat Kiley’s story?
• How does O’Brien’s use of figurative language enhance the reader’s experience?

In groups, find instances of how O’Brien used imagery to appeal to the reader’s senses on one of the following topics:

• The topography of Vietnam
• The Green Berets
• Mary Anne’s transformation

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short essay on Mary Anne’s transformation from an innocent high school girl into a predatory killer. How does her gender change the reader’s expectations about her reactions to the war? How does she defy those expectations? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?

HOMEWORK

1. Read “Stockings,” “Church,” “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Style” (pp. 117-136).
2. Review the stories you’ve read, and identify at least one object that functions as a symbol.
3. Come to class prepared to discuss its symbolic importance.
BACKGROUND

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book’s title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a work of fiction is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the book.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

There is a great deal of symbolism in The Things They Carried. Readers are told in the title story that Henry Dobbins carries his girlfriend’s nylons wrapped around his neck. In “Stockings,” O’Brien tells the story of how the stockings became a symbol of comfort and protection.

Identify some of the many other symbols in the book.

• How does the symbolic value of items help the reader better understand the personality of the character?
• If the character is a symbol, what does that person represent?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short story with a symbol that is central to the plot. Try to use a symbol that does not already have strong meaning attached to it.

HOMEWORK

1. Read “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” (pp. 137-161).
2. Review the stories you have read so far and write a short character analysis of Norman Bowker.
DAY SEVEN
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Works of fiction trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character’s strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist’s eventual successor failure.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Discuss the evolution of Norman Bowker’s character throughout the book.
- How does “Speaking of Courage” show us the complex relationship between one man, his fellow soldiers, and his family and friends in his hometown?
- Does learning about Norman Bowker’s post-war life change the way we feel about his actions during the attack that took Kiowa’s life?
- “Speaking of Courage” is the only story other than the title story, “The Things They Carried,” that is written in the third-person point of view. Why might O’Brien have chosen this narrative stance?

In “On the Rainy River” O’Brien writes:
“Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down” (p. 40).

- Do you believe there are any heroes in the book?
- If so, how do they display courage?
- Does the narrator’s opinion of courage change during the course of the book?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a two-page essay considering how “Notes” expands the way we read “Speaking of Courage.” How does the last paragraph of “Notes” demonstrate O’Brien’s struggle to find the “truth” about the Vietnam War?

HOMEWORK

1. Read “In the Field,” “Good Form,” and “Field Trip” (pp. 162-188).
2. Read Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.
THE QUANG NGAI PROVINCE AND THE MY LAI MASSACRE

The Quang Ngai Province, located on the south central coast of Vietnam, was targeted early in the Vietnam War because U.S. military officials suspected it of being a Viet Cong stronghold. By the end of 1967, most of the homes in the province had been destroyed and many thousands of civilians were homeless.

On March 16, 1968, the soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai six miles northeast of Quang Ngai. The company had sustained many casualties in the area over the previous weeks and emotions ran high. The troops, under the leadership of Lt. William Calley, entered the village firing although there were no reports of enemy fire. Eyewitnesses reported seeing old men bayonetted, women raped, and unarmed villagers—including children—shot in the back of the head.

Tim O’Brien served in Vietnam well after the horrific events of My Lai had taken place, but *The Things They Carried* examines the desensitization and brutality many troops experienced. In 1994, O’Brien accepted an assignment from the New York Times to return to Vietnam and write an article about it. “The Vietnam in Me” described O’Brien’s experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry, and his reaction to the massacre at My Lai.

In the article, O’Brien writes:

> What happened, briefly, was this. At approximately 7:30 on the morning of March 16, 1968, a company of roughly 115 American soldiers were inserted by helicopter just outside the village of My Lai. They met no resistance. No enemy. No incoming fire. Still, for the next four hours, Charlie Company killed whatever could be killed. They killed chickens. They killed dogs and cattle. They killed people, too. Lots of people. Women, infants, teen-agers, old men. […]

> Eventually, after a cover-up that lasted more than a year and after the massacre made nationwide headlines, the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison. Found guilty of the premeditated murder of “not less than” 22 civilians, Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but after legal appeals and sentence reductions, his ultimate jail time amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison[…]

> Calley aside, only a handful of men faced formal court-martial proceedings, either for war crimes or for subsequent cover-up activities, with the end result of five acquittals and four judicially ordered dismissals. […]

Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.

Americans first learned of My Lai in November 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story in the St. Louis Post Dispatch based on his conversations with Ron Ridenhour. A Vietnam veteran, Ridenhour learned of the events from members of Charlie Company. He had immediately appealed to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon, asking them to investigate the matter. In September 1969, as a result of a military investigation, Lt. Calley was charged with murder in the deaths of 109 Vietnamese civilians.
When Hersh’s story hit the press two months later, it had even farther-reaching effects. As the shocking details of the massacre reached the public, support for the war began to wane, more draftees began to file for conscientious objector status, and U.S. draft policy was reexamined. A military commission found widespread failures of leadership and discipline among the troops of Charlie Company. For his story, Seymour Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for international reporting.
DAY EIGHT
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a book either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story’s conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution or denouement, in which the aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

O’Brien mentions the deaths of several of the soldiers before he gives detailed accounts of how and when they died in later stories. Reading “In the Field” and “Field Trip” expands the reader’s understanding of Kiowa’s death and the narrator’s reaction to the events that took place in the field. Yet, in some ways, O’Brien undermines the drama by placing “Good Form” between these two stories. This search for a nebulous and shifting truth provides continuity between the stories and, in some ways, increases the reader’s tension by forcing us to question what is real.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Discuss Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.

O’Brien writes: “It’s time to be blunt. I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through the Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it’s not a game. It’s a form” (p. 179).

• What is the relationship between truth and fact in The Things They Carried?
• Why are facts important?
• How much factual information do we need to understand the truth?
• How might knowing all the factual information about O’Brien’s service in Vietnam hinder us from understanding the book?
• How does the search for truth enhance the book’s plot?

WRITING EXERCISE

Choose one of the soldiers in the field the night Kiowa dies and write a condolence letter from that character to Kiowa’s family.

HOMEWORK

Read “The Ghost Soldiers” (pp. 189-218).
Identify at least three themes explored in The Things They Carried.
DAY NINE
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a book. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader’s mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one’s personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. Literature often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

The Things They Carried explores the social pressures the soldiers faced, both in choosing whether or not to serve in Vietnam and in the way they conducted themselves while on patrol. It also examines each soldier’s personal moral code and, more subtly, the politics surrounding the Vietnam War.

Throughout the book, O’Brien challenges the reader to consider what constitutes truth and whether a well-told story can transcend the limits of fiction.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES AND WRITING EXERCISE

Social Pressure
Many of the soldiers’ actions are the result of social pressure: O’Brien’s unwillingness to dodge the draft by fleeing to Canada even though he opposed the war, the dark humor the unit displays in the villages, and the fact that they would kill and die “because they were embarrassed not to” (p. 21).

Identify instances where social pressure affects a character or the unit as a whole.

• Is this pressure positive or is it a negative influence?
• Support your answers with passages from the text.

Personal Moral Code
Choose a character and write a short analysis of the character’s individual moral code by quoting passages from the book.

Truth
O’Brien plays with the line between fact and fiction throughout the book.

“By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened . . . and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain” (p. 158).

• How does O’Brien blur the lines between reality and imagination.
• How does this contribute to our understanding of the war?

HOMEWORK

Read “Night Life” and “The Lives of the Dead” (pp. 219-246).
DAY TEN
THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

BACKGROUND

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer’s voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great book is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground. The Things They Carried is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of literature about the Vietnam War. Robert Harris, book editor for the New York Times, wrote:

Only a handful of novels and short stories have managed to clarify, in any lasting way, the meaning of the war in Vietnam for America and for the soldiers who served there. Tim O’Brien captures the war’s pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers. But he goes much further. By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth, he places The Things They Carried high up on the list of best fiction about any war.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

List the characteristics of a great book.
• Do you agree with Robert Harris’s review of The Things They Carried?
A great writer can be the voice of a generation.
• What kind of voice does Tim O’Brien create in The Things They Carried?
• What elevates a work of fiction to greatness?
• Is this a great book?
• Why or why not?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short essay exploring your personal reaction to The Things They Carried. Go beyond expressing like or dislike. Make a list of emotions you felt while reading the book and examine why. Which characters and scenes did you relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Was the resolution of the book satisfying? Comforting? Disturbing? Why?

HOMEWORK

Choose from the list of Essay Topics provided. Come to the next class with a draft of your essay.
ESSAY TOPICS

Organize your ideas around a thesis—that is, an argument or interpretation—about the story or stories. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons to support its conclusion. The thesis and evidence should be supported by references to the text.


2. Analyze the symbolic role of one of the objects a soldier carries in the book’s title story. Describe what the object represents to that character and why he chooses to carry it. Support your analysis with passages the text.

3. Tim O’Brien’s writing constantly seeks to give meaning to the events that happened in Vietnam. Create a written portrait of Tim O’Brien using three or four carefully selected passages that describe the narrator’s inner thoughts as evidence to support your ideas. What does each reveal about his concerns, hopes, and fears? How do certain word choices reveal the way he sees the world?

4. Throughout the book, O’Brien casts doubt on the veracity of his stories. Why does he do so? Does it make you more or less interested in the book? Does it increase or decrease your understanding? What is the difference between facts and truth? Is it fair to readers that the author uses elements of his own life and blurs the lines between fact and fiction in these stories?

5. If the United States instituted the draft and your number came up, would you choose to serve? Explain in detail why you would make one choice and reject the other. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the choice you would make?