  When at war, the civilian citizens of the country at war see the war as glorious and serving in it, to them, would probably be a great honor.  They have never experienced war and have built up a great fantasy, aided by movies and the media, which allows them to believe that although war causes great loss, the victory at the end of the war eliminates the loss.  If the people were not blinded by the fantasy that honors those who die protecting their country, they would have a totally different and real picture of war, would not be as eager to send young men and women to fight in them, and would not find serving in them as sweet or decorous.  Two works, Wilfred Owen’s poem, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” and Tim O’Brien’s short story, “The Things They Carried,” show creatively and effectively this reality of war that the civilians fail to see.   
  
  
            Throughout his work, Wilfred Owen uses imagery to vividly portray this grim reality of war to the reader.  He immediately begins his poem with the use of this imagery when he calls upon the reader to imagine the soldiers “Bent double, like old beggars …”(1), which causes the reader to understand that because of what they have been put through in the war, the soldiers become akin to old beggars that old age and poverty have forced to bend double.  Another vivid   
  
  
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image, given to the reader when the poem asserts that “many have lost their boots/ But limped on, blood shod” (5-6), allows the readers to realize that in war many suffer great pain and loss.  The uncertainty of war, shown when the narrator says, “An ecstasy of fumbling, / Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;/ But someone still was yelling out and stumbling…”(9-11), further cements the idea for the reader that war becomes something that people must suffer through and that causes great loss of life, not the false image that he or she had built up.  Another image pertinent to this essay that should make civilians realize the injustice of war, the “incurable sores on innocents tongues,” serves as a vivid reminder of the lifelong pain of war; although these soldiers are innocent men, the sores of war have been inflicted upon them never to leave their bodies.  One final unpleasantness of war, shown in line 18 through the image of the dead man being flung in a wagon, must make the civilian reader realize that even when people die in war, time lacks to honor them appropriately. After all this evidence against war the sweetness and decorousness of war surely diminishes.   
  
  
            Wilfred Owen also effectively uses the diction in his poem to portray this reality of war to the civilian reader.   Immediately, Owen begins with the phrase “cursed through the sludge”(2); obviously he wants the reader to understand that walking through that sludge was a curse and was undesirable.  Other words, such as, “limped on”(6) and “stumbling”(11), allow the reader to imagine a difficult to travel.   The speaker of the poem also uses words such as “devil”(20), “sick of sin”(20), “corrupted”(22), and “obscene as cancer”(24) to give the reader   
  
  
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the impression of war as something evil.   Words, such as “writhing”(19), “guttering, choking, drowning”(16),  “vile”(24), and “bitter”(23) depict war as something painful and immoral that should be detested.  Finally, Owen makes his ultimate declaration against war when he mentions “The old lie:  Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori.”(27-28): indeed it is not sweet or decorous to die for ones country because one must go through the reality of war that he portrayed in his poem.   
  
  
            Through his short story, “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien also claims that war is something that is difficult to live, but he does not out and out declare that civilians are lying to themselves by saying that it is honorable to die in war.  Although not explicitly declared, the possibility to build an argument against the sweetness of dying for one’s country exists in this story.    One...

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**CHAPTER 1: THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**

**Summary**

Lieutenant Cross carried a letter and pictures from Martha, a girl back home. His obsession with Martha distracts him from his duties as platoon leader. He constantly finds himself fantasizing about her when should be checking the perimeter or watching for ambushes. Lt. Cross not only carried the photographs of Martha, he also carried his love for her and the pain of knowing she would never return his love. Martha had sent him a pebble from the Jersey shoreline. Lt. Cross carried it in his mouth while humping and pretended that he was back with Martha at college instead of in Vietnam. He sat wondering if she was a virgin while Lee Strunk crawled through an underground tunnel and a Viet Cong sniper shot Ted Lavender. The next morning Jimmy Cross burnt Martha’s picture and her letters, but the guilt remained. He resolved to stop pining and act like a Platoon Leader.

Each soldier carries the same standard issue protective gear and weapons that help him survive. But they also ‘humped’ a variety of other items dictated by personal preferences, such as a bible, comic books, foot powder, a hunting hatchet, and marijuana. Rank also dictated what they carried. Platoon leaders carried a pistol, RTO’s carried the radio, medics carried morphine and syringes, big men carried machine guns, and regular grunts carried standard issue M-16’s among other equipment. They carried a silent awe at the power of the weapons, which could keep them alive by killing the enemy. They carried infection, the weak or wounded, the thumbs of slain Viet Cong, guilt, and the soil of Vietnam itself. Perhaps the only certainty of a rather ambiguous war was that there would never be a shortage of things to carry.

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Dignity was perhaps the heaviest burden for a soldier to carry. It could never be put down. Everyone had experienced fear, panic, or a time when the noise of battle just wouldn’t stop and they started crying, praying, making promises, or firing their weapons around madly. In Vietnam, the only tangible reason for fighting was to avoid the “blush of dishonor” (Page 21).. Men covered up their fear with tough talk and crazy stunts, even as they fantasized about ending the war by shooting off one of their own toes.

**Notes**

Chapter One introduces the reader to O’Brien’s writing style. There is neither an identified narrator, nor a cohesive narrative. Instead, we get a constant stream of memories, discontinuous events, observations, insights, and an attempt at realism. In addition several themes begin to develop, starting with the significance of the title. The different items carried in the backpacks serve to humanize and individualize the soldiers. By listing their various belongings, O’Brien helps the reader to identify with the characters in his book.

The first of these characters, Lieutenant Cross, is O’Brien’s sketch of an officer in the Vietnam conflict. Jimmy Cross daydreams about his girls, sex, college, the beach, and acts like a kid - because he *is*a kid. The kids fighting the war in Vietnam were brave, but they were still kids. Among other things, soldiers died from a lack of maturity. O’Brien shows that teenagers (the average age of an American GI in Vietnam was 19) were just not emotionally equipped to deal with the ugliness of war. They not only dehumanize their victims to relieve themselves of the burden of killing, they also dehumanize each other to cope with the deaths of their comrades. They use grotesque vocabulary to preserve the detachment between the living and the deceased.

The intangible items carried by these soldiers (which O’Brien has difficulty setting down even after the war ends) prove to be heavier than any backpacks. Soldiers carried the weight of duty, God, and country. O’Brien asserts, quite effectively, that none of the men knew why they were fighting. He writes, “it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march.” (Page 15) Their only real motivation was fear of being called a coward. “Men killed and died because they were embarrassed not to.” Death was better than humiliation.

## THE THINGS THEY CARRIED: FREE PLOT SUMMARY / SYNOPSIS

## THEMES

## *Isolation*

The soldiers constantly remark on their inability to communicate their experiences in a way that their family or peers will understand. Because of this, they feel a sense of isolation once they return home.

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## *Language*

O’Brien constantly remarks on how the language of war is purposely constructed to make pain and death seem less real. It is merely the dialogue of an elaborate play, in which they all act their part.

## *Truth*

Stories that never happened may contain more truth than actual events. Stories can reveal truth in a way that makes the stomach believe.

## *Courage*

Many heroic feats are done not because of an abundance of courage, but because men will do anything to avoid shame. Men kill and die because they are scared not to. Following one’s conscious often requires the greatest courage.

## *Redemption*

The hero (O’Brien) struggles to understand his past and his involvement in the Vietnam War. When he returns to Vietnam and sees the country has moved beyond the war, he realizes he can do the same. 

## MOOD

The book’s mood is one of reflection and sadness. This is largely due to the tragic nature of many of the stories. Although the author has fond memories of his companions during the war, he does not take pride in his actions - including actions others consider to be courageous. The path of experience and wisdom eventually leads to a form of redemption for the Tim O’Brien character, but the journey itself is not a happy one. 

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| Tim O'Brien - The Things They Carried Free Study Guide / Notes / Summary Tim O'Brien |

## Tim O'Brien - BIOGRAPHY

Tim O’Brien grew up in Worthington, Minnesota and now lives in Massachusetts. He graduated from McAlester College in St. Paul. In 1968 he was drafted into the Vietnam Conflict and served one tour of duty from 1969-1970. After returning home he enrolled in graduate school at Harvard University and studied government. After finishing his studies he worked as a national affairs correspondent for the Washington Post.

O’Brien has written several novels based on his experiences in Vietnam. *The Things They Carried*(published 1990) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. O’Brien won the National Book Award in 1979 for his novel *Going After Cacciato.*Another novel, *In the Lake of the Woods,*won the James Fenimore Cooper Prize from the Society of American Historians and was selected as the best book of 1994 by Time Magazine. His other novels include, *If I Die In a Combat Zone, The Nuclear Age, Northern Lights,*and *Box Me Up and Ship Me Home.*His latest novel,*Tomcat in Love,*was a New York Times bestseller following its publication in 1998. 

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The United States sent troops to Southern Vietnam in the early 1960’s to help stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. Prior to American involvement, Vietnamese Communists had fought a lengthy war to free their country from French colonial rule. In 1954, the Viet Cong gained control over Northern half of Vietnam, but the Southern half maintained a government friendly to the United States. Beginning in the late 1950’s, Northern Vietnam began waging a guerilla war (supported by both the USSR and China) to bring all of Vietnam under its control. The United States began supporting South Vietnam during the Eisenhower administration, but following the Gulf of Tonkin incident (in which an American warship was *allegedly*fired on by a Vietnamese submarine) the United States began committing troops to fight against the North.

Unfortunately for the United States, the governments of South Vietnam were corrupt, unstable, and did not have the support of the people. The South Vietnamese army was poorly trained. Americans found themselves fighting a guerilla war, of which they had little experience. Because of overwhelming American firepower and technological capabilities, the Viet Cong relied on ambushes, land mines, and other surprise attacks to confuse and demoralize American troops.

‘Charlie’ would open fire on an unsuspecting column of GI’s, then disappear into the jungle or a maze of underground tunnels before Americans had a chance to engage. This gave American soldiers the impression that the Viet Cong were ‘ghosts’ or ‘phantoms’. Instead of established battlefronts, soldiers spent their time marching up and down the hillsides, looking through tunnels, burning villages that supported the enemy, and trying to avoid ambushes. This style of fighting hurt morale by preventing the soldiers from feeling they were accomplishing anything. Nothing lost or gained. At the end of the day they were no closer to ending the war than at the beginning.

Many factors made the war unpopular in the United States. Drafting procedures produced an army where the average age of a GI was nineteen, the youngest of any American war. Their youth and inexperience led to errors in judgment and increased fatalities. Television brought these casualties into the homes of every American. The longer the war went on, the more unpopular it became. Many American either did not understand why their boys were fighting in Vietnam, or thought the government was wrong to be fighting the war. As victory began to seem less and less likely, the country turned its attention away from its fighting men. Returning soldiers received little recognition for their service, and were often subject to jeers or humiliation from anti-war protesters. As a result, many servicemen (like Norman Bowker) had trouble making the adjustment from soldier to civilian.

## THE THINGS THEY CARRIED: FREE STUDY GUIDE / LITERARY ELEMENTS

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The novel flows from the typewriter of a middle-aged man who is trying to find meaning and redemption in his war stories. It has neither a conventional narrator not timeline, which makes a plot line difficult to identify in the conventional sense. The incident that begins the rising action is his decision to disregard his conscious, go back to Worthington and report for the draft. This decision leaves him with a cynical view of courage and bravery that develops throughout the book. It also marks the declaration of an internal war, as if he spends the rest of his life trying to atone for his inability to make a pacifist stand. Throughout his tour of duty he develops close relationships with his fellow soldiers and witness the beauty and horror of war firsthand. When he returns home he carries the memories of conflict with him and is haunted by the deaths of both friends and enemies. The climax of the action is not until he returns to the field where Kiowa died and wades in for a symbolic baptism. Twenty years after the Treaty of Paris was signed, the conflict within him is finally over. The conclusion further explores how his writing aided his ability to grapple with the tragic memories and his own complicity in that horrible conflict.

The general theme of redemption connects a series of otherwise unrelated stories. The novel is very much a collection of stories about the truth that war and sorrow and reflection can teach us. Each story has a message, some buried deeper than the others. Stylistically, O’Brien often summarizes a story or a chapter in the final quote in the very last sentence. In the chapter “Church,” a discussion about religion and interaction with the Vietnamese people eventually boils down into the essence of Henry Dobbins final quote - “You’re right,” he said. “All you can do is be nice, treat them decent, you know?” (Page 123) O’Brien’s soldiers have an intuitive wisdom, capturing such truth in their ordinary commentary.

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In terms of structure and style, *The Things They Carried,*breaks from the conventional first-person narrative of the Vietnam memoir. In fact, the book constantly shifts back and forth from first to third person. Thus, the reader is not locked into one perspective. We do not see the war and its aftermath only through the eyes of the Tim O’Brien character. The sequence of events is also jumbled. The book begins is Vietnam, then drives ahead to an episode after the war, reverts back to the summer when he received his draft notice, ahead to the war, reverses to his childhood, etc. Not only are the chapter not connected in time, they’re often not connected by topic Even individual chapters suddenly fragment into sections of one or two paragraphs, memory flashes appear suddenly and the fade. In these sections, O’Brien dumps his memories onto the table as if they were building blocks, then sorts through them to see what he can assemble. O’Brien clearly does not want to give the impression that he has it all figured out, but rather this soul-searching process is what defines him as a writer. 

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

## *The Power of Language*

The emotional immaturity of the GI’s in Vietnam makes it imperative that they find ways to cope with the killing of enemies and the dying of friends. O’Brien writes, “They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness.” (Page 20) The soldiers within a platoon formed intimate relationships, but when death occurred language helped trivialize those bonds to make the separation less painful. They used words like *greased, zapped, offed, lit up,*to describe the deaths of their friends. When Ted Lavender died, the soldiers in his platoon talked as if it were the tranquilizers that had killed him - blew his mind. They way they described it in the stories he didn’t feel a thing. O’Brien remembers how, earlier in his life when Linda had died, Nick Vorheen had described it as ‘kicking the bucket’. Language is a coping mechanism, a way of making things less painful, or less real.

## *The Nature of Courage*

When he is forced into a decision over whether to report for the draft of run to Canada, O’Brien discovers that his understanding of courage is not quite correct. He had believed that courage was of a finite quantity, something that accrued at a fixed rate. If you emptied your account on one occasion, you would immediately have to begin saving for the next. Thus, he is surprised that the courage he had saved over the years is insufficient to carry him through his test of will on the Rainy River. Later, he reflects back on Nick Vorheen trying to steal away Linda’s red stocking cap, saying that he should have intervened, if only to practice being brave for future reference. Courage, he concludes, is a skill that must be learned like everything else.

Courage is also interlocked with fear and shame. O’Brien believes many of the things we do are not motivated by courage, but by shame. “Men killed, and died,” he writes, “because they were embarrassed not to.” (Page 21) Men did not march up and down the mountains of Vietnam because they were brave, but because they were afraid to be cowards, afraid to be humiliated in the eyes of their peers. This notion is illustrated in the story about Curt Lemon, where he has the dentist pull out a perfectly good tooth just to prove he’s not afraid of the drill. But when Rat Kiley finally shoots himself out of desperation, no one in the platoon labels him a coward. Perhaps O’Brien feels that his action required more courage than to mutely continue marching through the brush.

O’Brien revels in the ironical notion that the decisions which require the greatest courage are those that will cause others to label you a coward. This is the test that he himself cannot pass, the reason he’s so disappointed with himself. He allows fear of ridicule from his parents, his friends, and the townspeople dictate his decision instead of following his conscious.

## *Happening Truth vs. Story Truth*

O’Brien wants his stories to more than inform or educate. His writing style requires an emotional investment from the reader in order to understand the meaning. As such, when he tells a story he doesn’t feel bound by objectivity, or chronology, or even ‘truth’. The reader is often left wondering what really happened and what is invented. If you feel cheated because the story is fabricated, you’re missing the point - there are true war stories that never happened. They are parables, in a sense, conveying a message in a way so that the reader can *feel*it. For example, the blurb about a soldier who falls on the grenade trying to save his buddies, but they all die anyway. (Page 83) The story asserts the unspoken rule that acts of heroism do not always save lives. Sometimes they are not even remembered at all. This is contrary to what we would like to believe about war, and therein lies the truth. “A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.” (Page 78)

But he also points out many people cannot listen or read with their stomachs, they want stories with heroic plots and happy endings. After one reading, a lady approaches him and suggests he put away the sad memories and find new stories to tell. This lady didn’t understand the underlying message of the story. They aren’t really war stories at all, they’re stories that use war as a vehicle for insights about life. None of the stories are true because they never really happened; yet there is truth in the stories that somehow makes them more real than an actual occurrence.

## *Redemption*

O’Brien’s character is only one of a few characters searching for a way of unloading the emotional gear picked up during the war. His sense of guilt is two-fold. He never completely forgives himself for failing to take a moral stand against the war instead of enlisting. Compounding this original sin are the deaths of the soldiers around him, be they friend or foe, while he somehow survives the war. He obsesses over a young Viet Cong soldier he killed with a hand grenade, imagining the boy to be just like himself. Kiowa’s death is written in such a way as to lead us to believe that he was the young soldier who turned on the flashlight at night, causing the platoon to be mortared. Whether or not this is the case, Kiowa’s death has such a profound affect on him that he returns to the spot twenty years later in an attempt to find closure. O’Brien’s re-immersion back the muck of the shit field is a type of baptism. Though he emerges stained with sewage, he is somehow cleansed within. To further emphasize the chapter as a transitional point in the author’s life, he buries Kiowa’s sandals deep in the mud.

For other characters, the search for redemption is not as successful. Lt. Cross spends most of the war carrying around guilt for the lives lost because he was thinking about Martha instead of watching for ambushes. Each time a member of the platoon dies he takes personal responsibility. When he visits O’Brien’s home after the war, he asks O’Brien to portray him as a heroic leader. He hopes to find deliverance in O’Brien’s writing. Norman Bowker, on the other hand, never finds a release from the painful memories of the war. When he returns home he’s unable to break free from the gravitational pull of the war, a metaphor beautifully captured in the image of driving endlessly in circles around the lake. Unable to move forwards into a new life or return to the war, he eventually commits suicide.

## POINT OF VIEW

The novel makes strategic shifts back and forth between first and third person. The first chapter is entirely third person, laying the groundwork for the themes of the book with generalizations and insights. By the second chapter O’Brien shifts to first person, inserting a version of himself as a character, as he discusses the war with his former commanding officer. He continues to fluctuate back and forth between the two voices throughout the novel, producing an interesting effect. A new theme often begins with a few pages of musings and memories, written in third person, which is immediately followed by a first-person story that provides examples of the same theme. Thus, we have a fluid transition from general to specific.

Within the first person narrative there are also major transitions in time. Most stories involve O’Brien as a young soldier, told in real time as if he’s back in Vietnam. He describes the sights, sounds, and his emotion as if he’s still in his early twenties. Later in the chapter, however, he will jump ahead twenty years and share his feelings and impressions of the same incident. *The Man I Killed*is the best example of this time warp. 

## IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

**1)**“They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march.” (Page 15)

Commentary: This quote, coming early in the book, explains how the Vietnam War was different from WWII. Instead of engaging in open battle with a distinct front, Vietnam was more about search and destroy. Locating the enemy was more difficult than killing him. The endless monotony of the march deprives the soldiers from feeling as though they’ve accomplished anything - no battles won or lost. This increases the sense of ambiguity in the war and in the book.

**2)**“They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased*they’d say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping.*It wasn’t cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn’t quite dying, because in a curious way, it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of life itself.” (Page 20)

Commentary: See Themes - *The Power of Language*

**3)**“They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory and dishonor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor.”

Commentary: See Themes - *The Nature of Courage*

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**4)** “Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream.” (Page 57)

Commentary: While out fishing on the Rainy River, O’Brien reaches a crucial point of self-realization. See Themes - *The Nature of Courage*

**5)**“True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can’t believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.” (Page 78)

Commentary: See Themes -*The Power of Language*

**6)**“Mary Anne made you think about all those girls back home, how clean and innocent they are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try to tell them about it, they’ll just stare at you with those big round candy eyes. They won’t understand zip. It’s like trying to tell someone what chocolate tastes like.” (Page 113)  
  
Commentary: Rat Kiley talking about the sense of isolation soldiers feel from their peers back in the United States. While friends are working at fast food restaurant of going to college, these boys are killing people and blowing things up. They have little in common with former friends when they return.

**7)**“The town could not talk and would not listen. “How’d you like to hear about the war?” he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, therefore no guilt. The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the agencies of the government did their work briskly and politely. It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and it did not care to know. (Page 143)

Commentary: A scathing criticism of attitudes towards the war on the home front. America grew increasingly weary of a war that seemed to make no progress and be no closer to the end than to the beginning. Many Americans who had supported the war and expected young people to fight, then gave these young soldiers a thankless homecoming years later. Since the war was ultimately not successful, many people chose to pretend it had never happened at all. Unfortunately, for the soldiers who had killed, and bled, and sacrificed years of their youth, this was not as easy.

**8)**“He wished he could’ve explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. The distinction was important.” (Page 153)

Commentary: Another exploration into the nature of bravery. Each of us has a different standard for courage. When Norman reflects on his past deeds, he realizes he has outdone his own expectations for himself, yet he was not brave enough to pull Kiowa out of the muck or earn the Silver Star. This, of course, does not mean that he wasn’t brave, only that he won’t be recognized for bravery.

**9)** “Twenty years. A lot like yesterday, a lot like never. In a way, maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d finally worked myself out. A hot afternoon, a bright August sun, and the war was over.” (Page 187)

Commentary: See Themes - *Redemption*

**10)** “Azar shrugged. After a second he reached out and clapped me on the shoulder, not roughly but not gently either. ‘What’s real?’ he said. ‘Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can’t remember what real *is.”*(Page 204)

Commentary: Azar exemplifies the problems created when you give an American teenager an automatic rifle and throw him into a situation where normal laws of civilization do not apply. Because of his youth and immaturity, Azar begins to forget the established norms of everyday life and accept Vietnam as his new reality - a fantasyland for violent youth.

## SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / METAPHORS / SYMBOLS

## *The Lake / Field*

In ‘Speaking Of Courage’, the lake reminds Norman of the shit field, which serves as a metaphor for the power to kill. As Norman circles the lake in his hometown, he thinks about everything that had been taken away from him. His ability to communicate with his friends and parents. His relationship with his hometown. His ambition, or motivation to succeed. His best friend Max. It is as if Norman is a satellite. Unable to break free from the magnetic pull of the lake, he is doomed to constantly revolve around it. When he enters the water at the end of the chapter, Norman is signaling his desire for the lake to take him as well. This foreshadows his later suicide.

In the story ‘Field Trip’, O’Brien approaches the field with the same sentiments, but the outcome is much different. Returning to the site of Kiowa’s death over twenty years later, he is almost surprised to see the field at peace. Even more surprising is the lack of emotion he feels when confronted with the place that has symbolized everything vulgar and violent from his past. The field took away his friend, his innocence, self-worth, and hope. But when O’Brien enters into the field, it is as a baptism designed to cleanse himself from the ugliness of the war. He re-emerges with a new outlook, finally having freed himself from the shackles of bitterness.

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## *Mary Anne Bell*

Mark Fossie’s girlfriend symbolizes everything good about the United State of America. With her pink sweater and culottes, she is the All-American girl. The chapter “Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong” examines the transformation that occurs when this innocent girl is lifted out of the Cleveland suburbs and plunked down in the mountains of Vietnam. The events of the war and the eerie silence of the mountain jungles have a hypnotic effect on the young teenager. As she learns how to clamp off arteries and assemble an automatic rifle, she starts to lose the innocence that Mark loves so much about her. She begins to dress differently and wear less makeup. Eventually, she sheds her youthful dreams of getting married immediately after Mark’s return. Finally she separates from him completely.

The jungle has an even more radical effect on her character. After going out on ambush with the Green Berets, she develops a more violent and deadly disposition. She wears a necklace of human tongues and hangs out in the surreal world of the greenie hootch. She develops an appetite for the country of Vietnam, telling Mark she wants to eat the countryside, to have it all inside her. In the end, she disappears into the jungle and holds her own individual ambush night after night. The entire anecdote is a metaphor for how the war takes American youth and purity and corrupts it, leaving a series of teenage killing machines.

## *Linda*

O’Brien’s nine year old girlfriend who died from a brain tumor. Like Mary Anne, Linda symbolizes a form of youthful innocence. Or more specifically, she represents the desire to remember things as they once existed, before they were scarred by catastrophe. When O’Brien dreams of her, the white scalp and scars and bandages are gone. Writing involves the power to dream something and have the world dream along with you.

## *The Man I Killed*

The episode where O’Brien stands staring at a dead Viet Cong soldier on the trail expresses his bitterness at being placed in a situation where he must either be killed, or kill people like himself. He feels there was nothing brave about ending this person’s life, and wonders if he could have simply let the Viet Cong soldier continue down the path He imagines the soldier to be exactly like himself. A scholar who would rather study than fight. A boy who is afraid of the war, but more afraid of looking weak in front of his friends or relatives. A boy who listened to tales of a previous war almost from the day he was born. As O’Brien stands there looking at the soldier he feels like he is looking at himself. This is one reason the incident has such as paralyzing effect on him.

* [Brief Summary](http://www.shmoop.com/things-they-carried/summary.html)
* **Chapter Summaries**
* **The Things They Carried**
* [Love](http://www.shmoop.com/things-they-carried/love-summary.html)
* [Spin](http://www.shmoop.com/things-they-carried/spin-summary.html)
* [On the Rainy River](http://www.shmoop.com/things-they-carried/on-the-rainy-river-summary.html)
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# The Things They Carried The Things They Carried Summary

* First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries letters from a girl named Martha, who's an English major at Mount Sebastian College. He reads the letters every night. He's in love with her, but she's not in love with him.
* The men carry the things they need, like can openers and pocketknives and Kool-Aid and water.
* Some necessities are more individual. Kiowa, for example, carries a copy of the New Testament, and Ted Lavender is scared, so he carries tranquilizers until he's shot in the head.
* (For more on what the characters carry and how it helps us see them as individuals throughout this story, head over to "Character Clues: Props.")
* Some basic vocabulary: The soldiers are called "legs" or "grunts." To "hump" something means to carry it. (Get your mind out of the gutter!)
* You can hump something that exists, tangibly, like a pack of ammunition, or you can hump something in the emotional sense, like the love that Jimmy Cross has for Martha.
* Almost everyone humps photographs. Jimmy Cross carries two of Martha. In one, she's playing volleyball, and he's almost sure that she's a virgin (these facts are not related). The two of them saw a movie once, and he touched her knee, and he wishes that he'd carried her up to her room and tied her to the bed and touched her knee all night.
* They carry the things their military rank demands that they carry.
* For example, Rat Kiley is the medic, so he carries morphine, malaria tablets, comic books, and M&Ms.
* Jimmy Cross is the platoon leader, so he carries a compass, codebooks, and the responsibility for his men.
* Ted Lavender, until he dies outside the village of Than Khe, carries nine more rounds of ammo than anyone else, plus everything that everyone else carries, plus the fear.
* Jimmy Cross blames himself when Ted Lavender is shot, and afterwards, they burn Than Khe.
* They carry weapons: the M-60, the M-16, the M-79, M-14s, CAR-15s, Chi-Coms, RPGs, and bayonets, just to name a few. Lee Strunk carries a slingshot, Mitchell Sanders carries brass knuckles, and Kiowa carries his grandfather's hatchet.
* They all carry respect for the power of the things they carry.
* Before Ted Lavender dies, Jimmy Cross gets a good-luck charm from Martha. It's a pebble. Sometimes he carries the pebble in his mouth, and has trouble thinking about the war because he loves Martha so much.
* What the men carry depends on their mission. If it's in the mountains, they carry things like machetes. If they're going to a heavily mined area, they carry a 28-pound mine detector.
* On night missions, they all carry their own necessities. Kiowa carries moccasins. Henry Dobbins carries his girlfriend's stockings around his neck.
* Sometimes they're required to blow out tunnels. Before they blow them, they're supposed to search them – a pretty terrifying job. They draw numbers to see who has to do it.
* Outside Than Khe, Lee Strunk draws the unlucky number, and goes down into the tunnel. The rest of the men sit down to wait.
* Jimmy Cross tries to focus on the tunnel, but he keeps thinking about Martha, and what it would be like to be in that tunnel with her. He's trying to focus, but he's just a kid. He's just 24 years old.
* Lee Strunk pops out of the tunnel, grinning. Everyone relaxes and starts to joke around.
* Strunk then makes a noise like a funny ghost, and then all of a sudden, bam, Ted Lavender is shot in the head. He's on his way back from peeing.
* Sometimes they carry things according to superstition. Norman Bowker, for example, who's normally very gentle, carries a thumb that Mitchell Sanders cut off a Viet Cong (VC) corpse.
* They found the corpse lying in a ditch, and Mitchell Sanders said that there was a moral to it. He cut the thumb off, gave it to Bowker, and said that the moral was "Have gun, will travel."
* Henry Dobbins said he didn't get it. We, dear readers that we are, don't really get it either. And that's OK; this book is kind of about things not making sense, so don't feel bad.
* They carry stationery and chess sets and infections and the sky. They march just to march, not really thinking about where they're going. They carry their lives. They'll always have something to carry.
* After Lavender dies, Jimmy Cross and the men burn the village of Than Khe. Cross feels guilty for what happened to Lavender; he loved Martha more than his men, and look what happened. He cries for Lavender but also for Martha, because she belongs to another world, and she doesn't love him.
* Kiowa can't stop talking about how Ted Lavender died, how he hit the ground. He saw Jimmy Cross cry, and he says that the Lieutenant really cares. Norman Bowker asks him to shut up, please, so he does.
* But even though Kiowa stopped talking about the death, he can't stop thinking about it, and what he thinks is that the only emotion he can muster up is surprise.
* They carry themselves with dignity and poise, except when things are really scary, and then they don't. They joke about it afterwards.
* They make their vocabulary hard and rough to cover up how much they actually care.
* When Lavender dies, they say he was high on so many tranquilizers, he didn't feel a thing. Sanders says that there's a moral there – that drugs will ruin your day every time.
* They're tough, and carry the knowledge that they might die at any time. They carry the fear of embarrassment and the fear of blushing. They don't talk about these things, and they mock guys who take the easy way out by shooting off a toe or a finger.
* They pretend they're carried by jets back to America.
* After Ted Lavender dies, Jimmy Cross burns all of Martha's letters and her photographs. He knows it's just a gesture, that Lavender is still dead, but he does it anyway. He thinks he hates Martha now, while loving her at the same time.
* He decides that he's not going to be distracted by her anymore. He's going to crack down on the men, be all about discipline. No matter what the men think, he's going to be a real leader from now on.

## Vietnam during the Vietnam War and Small-Town America

Because O'Brien starts with the war, we'll start there, too. First, some basic history:

If you don't know already, the Vietnam War was a Cold War conflict that began for obscure reasons. Technically, it was a civil war between North and South Vietnam. You probably want to go over to our US History Guides on [Cold War: Causes and Origins"](http://www.shmoop.com/causes-of-cold-war/) and "[Vietnam War](http://www.shmoop.com/vietnam-war/)" to get all the details – it's a messy and complicated subject. After you browse those, come right back.

## The Quang Ngai Province of Vietnam

Hum-dee-dum…back? OK, so Vietnam had been colonized by the French in the late nineteenth century, but the French pulled out in the 1950s, and almost immediately thereafter, the war started. It lasted until 1975. American involvement happened kind of gradually, but the United States had soldiers over there helping out South Vietnam starting in the early 1960s. The Quang Ngai province, where O'Brien was a foot soldier, was a Viet Cong stronghold. The Viet Cong – and this is important – were not the North Vietnamese army, but a South Vietnamese guerilla outfit who were on the side of the North Vietnamese.

OK, we're going to stop the dry recounting of facts, now, because that's really all we need to get you oriented. The point is, the Vietnam War was an extremely unreliable animal, the American soldiers were aware of this, and O'Brien is an American author and veteran of the Vietnam War. The war began for reasons that were not clear, and the people that the American soldiers were supposed to be protecting kept trying to kill them. Nothing seemed to make sense. So you can see why O'Brien portrays the setting almost as another character. The men fight in the jungle, and because the Viet Cong could be watching them at any given moment, it seems as if the land itself is watching them. Black and white facts and "reality" are unreliable there.

## Small-Town America

Then there's small-town America. Before and after the war, America all about reliability – the opposite of Vietnam. A list of standard small-town features – A&W, Dairy Queen, movie theaters, skating rinks – pop up in stories set in both pre- and post-war times, showing the unchangingness of the place. Norman Bowker drives around and around the lake in his hometown (which, according to O'Brien in "Notes," is really O'Brien's hometown), and every time he goes around, the town is still the same. Before the war, in "The Lives of the Dead," the stasis of the town seems comforting, but after, in "Speaking of Courage," it's frustrating. Everything is absolutely, fixedly real. It's no wonder that O'Brien doesn't trust civilians to understand his version of truth.

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# The Things They Carried Writing Style

## Grandiose and Conversational

O'Brien alternates between the grandiose and the conversational for effect. For example, in "The Things They Carried," we have this sentence:

They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.(The Things They Carried.39)

The list begins with something pretty ambitious – "They carried the sky" – and continues from there, grandly building momentum with each added uncarry-able thing that the men must somehow carry. Finally, impossibly, at the end of the list, he tells us that the men carry gravity. It's an epic list, and it makes the men's task feel epic. Of course, in the previous section, there's also this exchange:

Henry Dobbins thought about it.

Yeah, well, he finally said. I don't see no moral.

There it is, man.

Fuck off.(The Things They Carried.35-38)

The style here is brutally conversational. Grammatical niceties are not observed – "I don't see no moral" – and it does not censor conversational tics such as an unnecessary "man" at the end of a sentence or casual cursing. It feels like something you would hear on the street. The combination of epic, beautiful sentences that you would definitely not hear on the street and sentences that would not be out of place in a high school hallway gives the impression that O'Brien is in love with language of all types, and will use whatever style he needs to make the content ring true.

As we're sure you're aware, it would be unwise to leave it there. So here it goes: "The Things They Carried" (the short story version) is an account, in lists, of everything the soldiers carried as they marched through Vietnam. The things they carried are in some cases physical (weapons, equipment, personal items) and in some cases intangible. It's the intangible things that O'Brien really focuses on in the book as a whole, whether it's emotions such as love or guilt, each other's guilty consciences, the weight of America's expectations, or the land of Vietnam itself. So the initial short story introduces the idea of soldiers carrying things both physical and intangible, and O'Brien carries that idea forward throughout the remainder of the book. So the title quite properly labels the book: it's a whole piece about all the things soldiers carried.

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***The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien**

* 1. Choose one of the following characters and say what physical things they carried (pages 4,6,7,9,11,12,plus others) What do the things they carried tell you about this person?

Jimmy Cross

Henry Dobbins

Dave Jensen

Ted Lavender

Norman Bowker

Rat Kiley

Kiowa

Mitchell Sanders

Lee Strunk

* 1. Why does O’Brien tell us what everything weighed? (e.g. Martha’s letters weighed 10oz)
  2. There are many detailed lists and a lot of military jargon. Why? What does this tell us about the writer? What is the effect on the reader?
  3. What are the non-physical things the soldiers carried?
  4. How would you describe the way the reader is told about Ted Lavender’s death?
  5. What descriptions are beautiful and what descriptions are awful?
  6. Analyse the meaning of the following quotes (most have more than one meaning):

“Necessity dictated” p4

“Flat and uninvolved” p10

“They carried all they could bear and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried” p7

“Carrying nothing” p8

“Imagination was a killer.”p10

“He was just a kid at war. In love.” P11

“They were afraid of dying, but they were more afraid to show it.” P16

“The blush of dishonour” p18

* 1. Martha’s tongue is mentioned three times – p3, 5, and 11. Why?
  2. Make lists of all the vocabulary which is associated with weight or weightlessness.
  3. What is section 1 about? Section2? Is there a pattern? Is there a reason for this?
  4. What is this story about? What is the main idea?
  5. How would you describe the writer’s style? Give examples to support your answer.
* **Major Themes**
* Physical and Emotional Burdens
* Fear of Shame as a Motivator
* How Truth is Changed and Maintained Through Storytelling
* What is moral and what is not?
* Loneliness and Isolation

Style of The things They Carried

Lists

Understatement

Descriptions of beauty

Many details

Figurative language – metaphors/similes/personification etc

Colloquial language

Reflection

Juxtaposition (Bonnie and Clyde + intimacy)

Foreshadowing