

Concept/Vocabulary Analysis
The Things They Carried By Tim O'Brien

Literary Text: The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

Organizational Patterns: The book is organized into chapters, but the chapters are not numbered, only titled. The book is more like a collection of short stories. One chapter can be taken out of the book and still make sense, or it can be read as part of the whole, larger story. The characters from the previous chapters, or shorts stories, build on to the next story/chapter, but it is not essential to have read a previous chapter to understand the next one. The book is more similar to a television sitcom with several episodes, whereas most novels are like a novel- one single story. This way of organizing the story is unique, but it helps readers to feel more engaged in the work.

This work is not organized chronologically. It jumps from twenty years ago, during the war in Vietnam, to now, to six years ago, to the time immediately following the war. There are stories from the author, narrator, and main character, Tim O'Brien, as well as stories about various men who were in the war with him.

Issues related to the study of Literature:

Theme: O'Brien touches on several important themes throughout the work. One of the major themes is the difference between truth and fiction. In one chapter, *How to Tell a True War Story*, O'Brien discusses the difference between happening truth and actual truth. Happening truth is something that actually happened, but actual truth, the way things are, the way things could have been, is sometimes more true than happening truth. In Vietnam, the soldiers' sense of truth and reality is often skewed. At one point in the work, a soldier, Azar, states "What's real? Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real *is*" (204). O'Brien states that everybody wants him to tell a true war-story, but when he tells stories he confuses what happens with what he thought or what could have happened. Reality can be arbitrary and O'Brien states that it doesn't matter if an event is true, because regardless of whether it happened, it is true.

Another theme that O'Brien concentrates on is the uselessness of war. None of the soldiers in Vietnam understand why they are in the war and they don't know what they are fighting for. The enemy is unseen. Twenty years later, O'Brien's daughter asks him why he had to go fight for Vietnam, why everybody was so mad at everybody else. O'Brien states, "Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing." When his daughter asks him what *he* wanted O'Brien answers, "nothing...to stay alive" (183). O'Brien is unable to answer his daughter's questions because he still, twenty years later, does not understand the purpose of the war. Earlier in the novel, O'Brien describes why he likes to play checkers: "there was a winner and a loser. There were rules" (32). This is so different from the war, which can be so indefinable. There is no clear winner or loser, no rules, no clear point. Because of this, O'Brien states that the war is without a driving purpose.

The last central theme of the novel is the burdens that the soldiers carry with them, essentially, the "things they carry". O'Brien discusses the physical items the soldiers carry, as well as emotional and mental baggage. His first chapter is entitled "The

Things They Carried" and he describes several physical and emotional items each soldier must carry. The "things" carried vary from pantyhose, to ammunition, to grief, to shame, to fear. Throughout the course of the novel, O'Brien elaborates on the things that are carried and they are described in further detail. Everything that happens throughout the course of the novel is a more detailed description of something that must be carried by the soldiers in Vietnam.

Setting: The main action of the story takes place in the jungles of Vietnam in the 1960s, during the Vietnam War. There are times though, where O'Brien describes events that happened before the war, in his small hometown in Minnesota. Some of the story often takes place at the time the novel was written, twenty years after the Vietnam War, in the late 1980s.



Foreshadowing: There are several times when O'Brien foreshadows, or even gives away important things that are to happen. Because the plot is scattered and in no chronological order, it is difficult to see the foreshadowing because everything has already happened when O'Brien starts to write the story. There is nothing in the future, no event that is led up to. O'Brien writes about these events as they have all already happened years ago and he mentions one occurrence before quickly switching to another. There is no driving plot. In the first chapter O'Brien describes the things the soldiers carried and he states, "Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried 6 or 7 ounces of premium dope..." Although he has not yet told any story about Lavender's death, O'Brien already gives this away to readers. Later he describes in detail the death of Lavender, but it is not important to him that readers know from the very beginning that Lavender will die.

Foreshadowing is also used in the last chapter of the book when O'Brien talks about his first love, Linda. On their first date, Linda wears a red cap and then every day in school she continues to wear the red cap. O'Brien is foreshadowing that the cap will play an important role in the story. As with Ted Lavender, O'Brien tells readers that Linda dies before the action in the story actually takes place. This is another form of foreshadowing.

Point of View, Narrative Voice: The point of view is from the narrator and the author, Tim O'Brien. He tells the story in first person. For the first chapter, O'Brien remains almost completely out of the story, only telling about the soldiers and the different things they carry throughout the war. It is not until the second chapter that readers are even aware that the story is being told through the first person. O'Brien inserts himself into the

story by saying "many years after the war Jimmy Cross came to visit me at my house in Massachusetts..." (27). Now readers know who the story is about. Many of the stories are about O'Brien, but others are about the soldiers who were in the war, and O'Brien tells their stories for them. Sometimes O'Brien is there for the event he is writing about, often times he is not. In some of the stories O'Brien is the central character, and in others he is not present at all.

O'Brien's narrative voice is very close to the surface and very personal. Reading the book is more like talking to a close friend than reading a literary text. He uses incomplete sentences and slang and starts talking about one subject before jumping quickly to another subject. He starts several sentences with "and" or "but", as if he was already talking about the subject. His writing is almost just like he has written down exactly what is going through his mind. One chapter O'Brien starts with "It's time to be blunt." In this way, O'Brien is talking right to readers, unabashed and hiding nothing. Later on the same page O'Brien states "But listen" as if he is afraid that the readers are not understanding what he is trying to tell them (179). The narrative voice is strong and personal and readers are able to feel completely involved in the work.

Tone: O'Brien does not dress up his work. There is no flowery language or long descriptions of scenery. The tone is more abrupt than that. At some points in the work has an air of hopeless, like O'Brien has given up on ever making sense of the war. When describing the soldiers, O'Brien's tone is bleak, but the reading material is not so heavy to weigh readers down.

Irony: One of the biggest ironies in the work is when a soldier, Kiowa, is buried in a field of human waste and dies because of it. The field, which has become the dumping grounds for a sewer, turns into a kind of swamp, and Kiowa is unable to escape from it. As his fellow soldiers search for his body among the waste one soldier, Azar, comments, "man, talk about irony. I bet if Kiowa was here...he'd just laugh. Eating shit- it's your classic irony" (165). The situation is ironic because the entire war has been to these men, a waste. Now, they have lost their friend to the waste, literally and figuratively. The soldier died for no reason and because of that his life was wasted, just like he is buried in waste now. The soldiers believe that the war is "a bunch of shit" and now they are dying in a "shit field" (166).

Another small, funny case of irony is that O'Brien states that the dentist in the army has "bad breath" (87). Even the dentist has a hard time keeping his mouth and body groomed.

Affective Issues related to the work:

- Students may be able to understand the feeling of uselessness that many of the soldiers feel after the war. Have they ever had a life changing event, something very emotional or devastating happen to them, and afterward nothing seemed to matter anymore? How do you make sense of life and mundane, every day things, when life is so different from how it was remembered? How do you think these soldiers were able to go on with their lives?
- O'Brien talks about the power of stories and the difference in real truth and happening truth, happening truth being things that have actually happened. Some things O'Brien tells did not actually happen, but "could have happened". "A thing may happen and be a

total lie; another thing may happen and be truer than the truth" (83). When is it okay for students to tell things that have not actually happened? How much of O'Brien's story do students think really happened and how much did he make up? Does this make students mad or is it okay with that he added some parts to his work? How does this affect the story?

-After being injured twice, O'Brien is able to leave the combat zone. Afterward he meets up with some fellow soldiers and he doesn't feel like he fits in with them any more. He feels he is part of a different world. Students may be able to relate to this, switching groups of friends and leaving a circle of close buddies. How did O'Brien react and adjust to this? How do students adjust now? What are reasons that students would need to leave a group of friends and is it possible to still remain good friends after the group is not as tight as it used to be?

-Many of the soldiers are in love with girls who do not write them back or girlfriends who have since broken up with the soldiers. Why is it important for these soldiers to hold on to these girls? Have students in the classroom had obsessive crushes that have kept them going or given them energy? Can they relate to the way these men's emotions are dependent on the girls back home? How did this affect the soldiers and how can it affect students to rely on a member of the opposite sex for happiness?

Vocabulary issues

-The biggest concern with language and vocabulary in this book is the use of swearing. Because he writes about a war zone, O'Brien uses much cussing that may not be appropriate for any classroom study, let alone younger grades. The narrator does not cuss himself, but rather uses these swear words when writing the dialogue of his characters. This may be a concern for some parents of students. The "f" word is used several times. (O'Brien explains his language by saying "if you don't care for obscenity than you don't care for the truth" (69).

-Much of the vocabulary is war vocabulary and students may need to become familiar with some of these terms. However, it is useful vocabulary that students should learn any way, so the time spent learning these words will not be in vain. Some of the words most often used are: KIA, lieutenant, morale, ambush, hootch, foxholes, bunker, battalion, greenies, RTO, and USO.

-The vocabulary is not too advanced and students should not struggle with much of it. Some vocabulary words from the text that may be difficult for students are affluent (138), atrocity (209), culottes (91), sadism (87), valor (161). These words could all be studied and learned, as they are words that will be important for students to know how to use in every day conversation.

Background Knowledge: It is important for students to understand something about politics and war. A little history should be given on why America was in Vietnam and what we were fighting for. Because it was not a traditional war with a definite enemy, like most of America's wars up until this point in history, it may be difficult for students to understand why the United States chose to get involved in this war. Students should also be made aware of the controversy over the Vietnam war and all of the protests against war that took place across the nation. Understanding the controversy surrounding

the war will help students to understand why so many of the soldiers feel useless throughout the story: they don't know what they are fighting for.

Implications for students of diversity: O'Brien has only one friend in the war who is culturally diverse. Kiowa, an Indian friend, is often teased because of his ethnicity. His fellow soldiers seem to think less of him. After a conversation with Bowker, Kiowa quiets down, and Bowker replies, "That's a smart Indian. Shut up" (18). In this way, Bowker is treating Kiowa almost like a child or a pet, telling him that he is being good because he has shut his mouth. Kiowa is treated as if he were dumb because he is of a minority. Later when Kiowa refuses to speak, Bowker states, "One thing I hate, it's a silent Indian" (19). Both of these things said by Bowker are discriminatory and rude. He is stereotyping Kiowa because of his race. Students of diversity may be able to relate to this and understand how Kiowa feels when he is treated this way. All students, even culturally diverse students, should enjoy reading this book because it is about war, which affects all students.

Gender Issues: Women are in the novel very little, and when they are, they are one dimensional. The women are idolized and obsessed over by the men, but there is little depth in the women characters. Any time a girl is brought up, it is because it is a girl who the soldier loves and pines over, but the girl rarely loves him back. These women are seen more as objects than people; something the soldiers want so badly, but can not have. In addition to this shallow view of women, the men are often disrespectful and crude toward women. When O'Brien goes to visit Norman Bowker, Norman suggests that they "chase pussy". This is crude and shows women merely as a means for satisfaction for the soldiers. The only woman who has any depth throughout the novel is O'Brien's daughter, Kathleen. However, even Kathleen is hardly discussed in the book, and when she is she is a simple character who can not understand the affects the war has had on her father.



The central question/enduring issue: The central question in the text is the things that people/soldiers carry through their lives. Some of the things that are carried are literal, but some are figurative. The figurative things that the men carry are often embarrassing—they are shame and cowardice. O'Brien's texts shows men at their weakest moments, with nothing hidden. He examines men when all the covers are off, when they are at their raw, true, genuine selves. It is a study of human nature. He shows how men are affected by tragedies, and how they react. O'Brien states that he was not brave enough to not go to war; he was too scared to stay home and face his neighborhood who would forever look

down on him for not going. This is pride that O'Brien carries, and the pride pushes him to war.

Throughout the entire text, O'Brien examines the things that are carried by the soldiers. He spends one entire chapter describing Norman Bowker after the war, as he circles around a lake carrying the grief and the pain from the war. Norman carries guilt because he feels responsible for Kiowa's death. O'Brien's work focuses on how long we can carry things and the burden that they can be. He discussed a literal weight of figurative things that are carried, how something intangible can literally weigh a person down because the burden is so heavy. The book is a study of the things that people carry, the memories, the stories, the feelings that we take with us.

Research Issues/ Project Ideas

1. Have students study gangrene and shock, two things that O'Brien suffers from during the war. Have them become familiar with the dangers and the diseases that can occur while fighting a war. Not all wounds are caused by bullets or grenades. Have students do a research project on what killed the most soldiers in the Vietnam war and what things were the biggest danger to soldiers.
2. Throughout the book, O'Brien's disapproval of the war is made manifest. Have students do a research project to find out what the majority of Americans thought about fighting the Vietnam war. Why were some opposed? Why were some in favor? What are the similarities between this war in Vietnam and the current war in Iraq?
3. Have students study the weather in Vietnam and do a project to understand what it must have been like for the soldiers in the wet, mushy, hot, humid weather. If possible, find some way to stimulate these conditions, like turning the heat all the way up in the classroom and making students wear heavy coats to understand the intense heat. It would be beneficial to find some way to make it rain in the classroom too. I don't know if this is possible.
4. Have students create maps of Vietnam to help them better understand everywhere the soldiers had to march. O'Brien mentions many cities in his work. Include these cities in the map.
5. O'Brien talks a lot about the power of stories. He says that he is able to cope with the war because he writes about the war. Have students write their own story in a way that is powerful and moving, like O'Brien's story. Have them study what O'Brien says about stories, about the differences in real truth and happening truth and the chapter *How to Tell a True War Story*. Have them tell a true story about their life, and emphasize making it personal and vivid and lifelike, like O'Brien's story.

Informational/Functional Texts:

1. Maps of Vietnam

2. History books about the Vietnam war

3. Pamphlets or some kind of information about the diseases that soldiers suffered from in the war.

4. Texts on the different kind of ammunition that was used during the war, The differences between grenades, M16s, and other types of artillery.

5. Information on Ernest Hemingway's writing style and sample text. O'Brien and Hemingway have many similarities in the way that they write.

