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The Things They Carried

by

Tim O'Brien

1990



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Shane Strate

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Because this novel is a compilation of various episodes from the author's life, the settings vary in terms of both time and space. Most of the stories take place in Vietnam, during his tour of duty in the late 1960s. But he also relates memories from life in his hometown in.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Tim O'Brien - The protagonist of the novel. He is a Vietnam veteran who has become a writer since returning home from the war. The stories of his platoon are told through his eyes and involve the tragedy, camaraderie, and ugliness of war.

Lt. Jimmy Cross - The Commanding officer of Alpha Company. He is obsessed with a girl back home in New Jersey, and his preoccupation with her distract his attention from the war and sometimes leads to casualties. This leaves him with an overwhelming sense of guilt.

Kiowa - A deeply religious American Indian soldier in Alpha Company who is..... respected and loved by the entire platoon. His death deeply affects O'Brien, as well as other soldiers.

Norman Bowker - Another member of Alpha Company who survives the war, but is unable to make the transition from soldier back to civilian. His experiences have isolated him from the people back home, and eventually he commits suicide.

Azar - A young brash soldier who enjoys playing pranks and the thrill of.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Tim O'Brien, the author and a Vietnam Veteran, is the protagonist in this novel. Throughout the book he reflects on his experiences in.....

Antagonist - In this man versus himself conflict, O'Brien is also the antagonist. He struggles with his own feelings of guilt, hatred and cowardice. He inwardly.....

Climax - The inner conflict reaches its peak when O'Brien returns with his daughter to the field where Kiowa died. He submerges his body in the muck as a form of.....

Outcome - With the resolution of conflict, O'Brien stops fixating on what kind of man he might have become if he had not been drawn into the war. He also comes to.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

At first glance, *The Things They Carried* may read like an autobiographical account. Tim O'Brien is the main character, but it is a version of Tim O'Brien invented by the author. The fictional O'Brien receives his draft notice in the summer of 1968 and faces an ethical dilemma. He must decide whether to do the seeming honorable thing and report for the war, or whether he should obey his conscience and either go to jail or to Canada. This process teaches him a great deal about the nature of courage and about himself. He learns that people who do brave things are often motivated only by embarrassment of shame.

Unable to stand against the pressures of God and Country, O'Brien goes to Vietnam and carries a new sense of shame with him. Once there he finds a war where soldiers carry all manner of weaponry, none of which is as heavy emotional baggage. They carry fear, hate, guilt, love, dreams, and blame. They used tough, coarse, language to make the war seem less real, thereby trivializing their involvement in it. They struggled with the knowledge that they were alive while their buddies were dead. Most of all, as they marched from village to village, they carried the question 'what's it all for?'

Looking back now, he realizes that the war is now reduced to stories. Stories put a spin on the war, make it seem less painful, less real. Stories get at the truth of war by avoiding generalizations, transcending the boundaries of actual events. Story-truth can often be more

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.

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.....

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.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - 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

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.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Chapter One (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.

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.

Chapter Two (Love)

Summary

Many years later, (Lieutenant) Jimmy Cross visited the author at his home in Massachusetts, where they reminisced about the war. Cross confesses he'd never forgiven himself for Lavender's death that day. He tells O'Brien that he'd met Martha again at a high school reunion; she'd spent time as a missionary in Africa and never married. When Cross reminds Martha of his love for her, she only looks at him with a vague misunderstanding. She doesn't understand how men do the things they do. O'Brien remarks that he would like

to one day write a story about all this, and Cross wants to be portrayed as a hero. Cross tells O'Brien "Don't mention anything about ..." O'Brien promises he won't.

Notes

Despite his undying devotion to Martha, when they meet again Cross finally realizes that there is an unbridgeable gulf between them. Martha spent her post-college years doing volunteer service, and Cross spent his killing people in Vietnam. Martha cannot comprehend Cross, because his soldier past horrifies her. It is an example of how the experiences of a Vietnam vet continue to isolate him from loved ones long after he's returned from the war

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Tim O'Brien - The main character and narrator of most of the stories, he is the lens through which we view most of the action in the book. We follow his recollections of the war, from receiving his draft notice until he eventually returns to Vietnam as a middle-aged father. The main conflict in the novel is an inner conflict as O'Brien struggles to release the pain and anguish that has built up as a result of his war experiences.

Azar - The classic stereotype of *l'enfant terrible*, Azar is the result of taking an aggressive, immature American teenager and showing him how to use an M-16 rifle. He treats his claymores as if they were firecrackers and has little respect for human or animal life. After strapping the puppy to a claymore and then detonating it, he wonders what everyone is so upset about. After all, isn't that the type of behavior one expects from a child? Azar can always be counted on for an insensitive joke at.....

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 nor 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.....

THEMES 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.....

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.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES

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.....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / 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.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Every reader should understand that this book is *not* an autobiographical look at the life of Tim O'Brien. This is a fictional account of a veteran that he named Tim O'Brien. Moreover, none of the stories he tells about his 'own life' are true, including the chapter where he almost goes.....

Title: *The Things They Carried*

Author: Tim O'Brien

Date Published: 1990

Meaning of the Title: Referring to the idea that despite all of the gear and weaponry that the soldiers wore and carried, they also carried the weight of duty, God, and country on their backs as a higher burden.

Genre: Novel; Coming of Age story; War Story. **NOT** an autobiography.

Setting: During the Vietnam War in the late 1960s in Vietnam; and in the late 1980s in Massachusetts.

Protagonist: Tim O'Brien (a fictional character with the same name as the author)

Antagonist: Again, O'Brien; struggling with his own feelings.....

STUDY QUESTIONS / QUIZ

- 1) When Mark Fossie brings his girlfriend over to Vietnam, what happens to her?
 - a) She takes one look at the camp and goes back home.
 - b) A sniper in the village kills her.
 - c) She goes out on ambush with the Green Berets.

d) She enlists as a nurse.

2) Who straps a puppy to a claymore device and detonates it?

- a) Azar
- b) Rat Kiley
- c) Norman Bowker
- d) Dave Lemon.....

Answer Key

- 1) C
- 2) A
- 3) B
- 4) D
- 5) C
- 6) A
- 7) C
- 8) B
- 9) C
- 10) D
- 11) A
- 12) B
- 13) C
- 14) C
- 15) A

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS

1) According to O'Brien, what is the difference between story-truth and the real truth? What examples from the novel help explain this distinction?

How does the author's notion of courage change over the course of the novel? What does he think courage is before the war, and how does he view it now?.....

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