

Extended Essay

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

Tim O'Brien

Word Count: 3997

ABSTRACT

The aim of this extended essay is to analyze the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien by dwelling on the characters and contrasting their physical baggage with their emotional burdens. The researcher asks the question, "*how are the personal possessions used to illustrate the emotional, mental and physical features of the characters forced to fight in a war they were against?*" and investigates the effects of war on the personalities and behavior of the characters. The three aspects in question will be further investigated amongst the characters and related to the book with necessary quotations and remarks. The researcher tries to adopt a perspective as neutral and objective as possible in her analyses and interpretations. There is a brief historical context, in order to reflect the dimensions of warfare, and the author's involvement in the context is explained. The researcher aims to present the decisive background information, the effect war has on young and inexperienced soldiers as well as civilians, and explain the burdens they carry, both concrete and abstract.

Word count: 172

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BACKGROUND

THE BOOK

The book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien is a recollection of true war stories from the Vietnam War. The book was published in 1990. O'Brien is a veteran who had returned home from the terror of the war about two decades ago and still carried the stories with him. The violence and brutality of the war stayed with him and he felt the need to put it into words. There's an interview he did for *Big Think*, a YouTube channel, where he is asked what he carries two decades after the war, and O'Brien says that he carries the sadness, the stories and the ghosts of dead enemies and dead Americans. He mentions that he wrote the book in order to keep his memories alive and that he recycled his memories of the war so he could look at them from different angles. The war was horror, but it was his inspiration.

O'Brien successfully gets his point across by using repetition throughout the book. One of the most important aspects of war, according to O'Brien, is the sense of pride that the soldiers carry. Amongst the emotional baggage they are bound with, they also carry grief, fear, terror, love; they carried their own indiscretions. O'Brien himself confesses that the sole reason he went to the war in the first place is the fear of judgment he would receive from his relatives and loved ones.

One of the things that captures the reader's attention is the metaphor of the "freedom birds". The soldiers all seem to dream of the freedom birds, because they saw them as an escape. Freedom birds are a metaphor for choppers, which take away the wounded and the dead. In a way, the soldiers would rather be casualties than to stay in the war field. They do not mind getting injured, or even dying, as long as they get to free themselves of the weight of the war.

THE VIETNAM WAR

The Vietnam War started on November 1st 1955 and ended on April 30th 1975. It took place in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It resulted in North Vietnamese victory. Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos were taken over by communist governments. Richard Nixon became the president of the United States in 1969 and was involved in shifting the Vietnam War for the Americans. His plan was called Vietnamization and he claimed that he was going to shift the burden of the war to the South Vietnamese. Although his plan was to get America out of the war, the war actually became more violent while he was the president.

It was an unwanted war and Americans were against it. American soldiers did not want to be drafted to a war nobody wanted to fight. There were two ways of avoiding the draft for the Vietnam War. One of them was burning draft cards which would be a public display of protest and was illegal. The other way of avoiding the draft was to exile to Canada, which was also illegal but there was less risk of getting caught as it would be private.

INTRODUCTION

The author of *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien, faces the dilemma of getting out of the war by exiling to Canada or staying and fighting a war he hated. There is not a genuine storyline in the book. O'Brien made sure to pick the right stories to get his point across. The book consists of stories of moral dilemmas and life-changing decisions. The characters are mostly O'Brien's comrades and they all carry small items of their pasts to keep their feet moving in a rough setting such as war. Whilst carrying objects that represent who they used to be before they were drafted, they disappear into the blackness of the war. It's a fascinating element that

they carry their old lives with them through the war, and after the war is over they carry the war with them for the rest of their lives.

The one thing soldiers need in war is hope. They are hoping to save their countries, they are hoping to get out alive and they are hoping to go back home as how they entered the war. The violent and savage nature of war has a way of changing people. As soldiers become veterans, in a way, boys become men. "I was Timmy then; now I'm Tim" (O'Brien, 223) They do not see the world like they saw it before. In this essay, the researcher will be investigating how the personal possessions are used to illustrate the emotional, mental and physical features of the characters forced to fight in a war they were against. The analysis will be made through a categorization of the characters and look further into their possessions and the luggage the soldiers carry in different dimensions.

DEVELOPMENT

To fully understand the nature of war stories, we need to comprehend that not all of them are a hundred percent accurate. Tim O'Brien makes sure to point out this fact multiple times in the book. He claims that there is always a slight, unintentional altering when it comes to telling war stories. Soldiers who witness the entire brutality of the war and face death countless times out in the field tend to tell the stories from their point of view, and it is not always possible to be objective. Although O'Brien tells the readers that war stories are not always true, he explains the reason why he wrote about his war stories. "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present." (O'Brien, 172)

Tim O'Brien's main focus while writing *The Things They Carried* was the possessions the soldiers carried through the war, whether emotional, mental or physical. Firstly, O'Brien

gives examples of some of the burden the soldiers bared. “Rat Kiley carried brandy and M&M’s candy. Ted Laender carried the starlight scope. Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter. They all carried ghosts.” (O’Brien, 9)

All of the things they carried somehow connected them to the lives they left behind and made it harder for them to fully commit to the war. Some of the characters’ deaths were by mistakes and some of them were by not giving their minds to the war, but all of them had something to do with the burdens they failed to let go of. The researcher’s aim is to analyse the things soldiers carried, by making a brief analysis of each character and subcategorize the emotional, mental and physical possessions.

CHARACTERS

Jimmy Cross

The presence of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in the war field was unintentional and he did not know what he was doing even though he was in charge of the entire group of men. He is tormented by guilt each time a man he is responsible for is killed, because he believes he cannot take care of his men while he is preoccupied with a romance he left behind. He believes his poor decision-making and love-struck judgment prevents him from being able to protect and lead his men the way he is supposed to. He carries belongings of his long-distance girlfriend, Martha, such as her pictures, love letters and even her pantyhose. He refuses to let go of her memories, which leads to an insufficient performance out in the field. He particularly feels guilty for the death of one of his men, Ted Lavender, because he was distracted by his faraway love while

Lavender died. He confesses his perpetual guilt to Tim O'Brien decades after the war and tells him that he never really forgave himself for Lavender's death.

Emotional aspect: He carries jealousy for Martha. He keeps wondering whether Martha has other boyfriends or if she's a virgin. He cannot help his emotions because he is so in love with her. He carries his love for Martha and his memories of her. The cause of his emotions is Martha and these emotions affect his performance and judgment in the field. His emotional possessions later become mental luggage as war continues and his emotions come in the way of his decision-making while leading his group of men. "He pictures Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her." (O'Brien, 6) In this context, emotional and mental possessions do not exactly differ from one another.

Mental aspect: He carried pain and guilt. He believes he is beyond responsible for the deaths that occur within his soldiers, which messes with his mental health as well as his emotional state. Guilt can be considered both an emotional and mental luggage. "Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself." (O'Brien, 6)

Physical aspect: Letters and a good-luck charm from Martha. A compass, maps, code books, binoculars and a 45-caliber pistol. O'Brien uses a rather lighthearted tone to create balance between opposite qualities by making horror seem less of an issue. "He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men." (O'Brien, 5) He makes it seem like physical, mental and emotional possessions all fuse together and become a single burden.

Jimmy Cross's love for Martha comes to a point where it is both an emotional and physical burden, which messes with his mentality as well. "To carry something was to hump it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the

swamps. In its intransitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive.” (O’Brien, 3)

Dave Jensen & Lee Strunk

Although they were not best friends, they trusted each other. As they learned to place confidence in each other, they made a pact. If one of them were to get seriously wounded and became a burden for the rest of the group, the other one was to take him down; find a way to end it. A few months after the pact was made, Strunk stepped on a rigged mortar ground and it took off his right leg at the knee. According to the pact, Jensen was supposed to take him down, but he did not want to live with the guilt of killing one of his comrades, let alone someone he relied on. Therefore, he failed to kill him as he promised, and he was rather relieved that Strunk later died without Jensen getting his blood on his hands.

Emotional aspect: The emotional possessions of Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk appear while they are in the war. They become friends after a few juvenile physical encounters and they make a pact to put one another down if something happened to them beyond repair. This pact reflects on the burden their presence could be to the rest of the soldiers. They prefer dying rather than becoming a burden to the others, which is an example of the maturity of Jensen and Strunk. “In late August they made a pact that if one of them should ever get totally fucked up --a wheelchair wound-- the other guy would automatically find a way to end it.” (O’Brien, 62)

Mental aspect: After Lee Strunk steps on a rigged mortar ground, Dave Jensen faces the dilemma of whether putting Strunk down as they agreed or choosing not to live with the guilt. This pact becomes a burden to both of them, because after the mortar ground incident, Lee Strunk lives with the fear of wondering if Jensen will actually kill him, and Jensen does not want

to have Strunk's blood on his hands. "Later we heard that Strunk died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight." (O'Brien, 63)

Physical aspect: Dave Jensen carried earplugs, a rabbit's foot, toothbrush, dental floss and several hotel-sized bars of soap. These possessions reflect on the mental state of Jensen, because he still remains clean even though he is fighting in a war. He still believes in good luck, which is rather ironic, because if he did have luck on his side, he would not have been drafted in the first place. Lee Strunk carried tanning lotion, a slingshot; a weapon of last resort, he called it. Strunk's possessions show us that he is a careful soldier, always ready to fight back in case of an attack. However, his preparedness does not help him with his mortar ground incident and later, his death. "Then he panicked. He tried to get up and run, but there was nothing left to run on." (O'Brien, 62)

Curt Lemon & Rat Kiley

Curt Lemon's story reflects on the mistakes O'Brien thinks could have been avoided in hindsight. Lemon is a juvenile soldier who is killed when he steps on a booby-trapped 105 round. Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon were playing catch when he was killed, which is a burden to Rat Kiley. Tim O'Brien does not particularly like Curt Lemon, but his death is something that haunts O'Brien to this day. Lemon is a character with irrational, exuberant fears, and O'Brien believes his death was a preventable mistake. Curt Lemon's character traits, in a way, represent the immaturity of the young American soldiers in Vietnam. None of the soldiers knew why they were there or what they were doing. "Lemon and Rat Kiley started goofing. [...] They were kids; they just didn't know." (O'Brien, 66). They were forced to grow up and mature out in the field, but they still carried their childhood with them.

Emotional aspect: Even though Lemon's death is not entirely in Kiley's hands, Kiley feels a tremendous amount of guilt for it. Lemon steps on a booby-trapped 105 ground while they are playing catch and gets killed. Kiley writes a heartfelt letter to Lemon's sister, explaining how he was killed and what a great soldier and a human being he was until he died. Kiley sees Lemon as his best friend and his death truly shakes him up. He pours his heart out on the letter, but his sister never writes back. This might reflect on how lonely the soldiers are, away from their homes and families, and nobody even misses them anymore. Out in the field, they are by themselves and completely alone. "Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back." (O'Brien, 65)

Mental aspect: Guilt can be considered both an emotion and a mental state of mind. After Lemon's death, Kiley goes crazy. He hurts and later shoots a baby buffalo just to cause him pain. He is trying to get the anger out. In a sense, the fact that Lemon's sister never writes back to Kiley reminds him how lonely they all are out in the field. He gets more violent in order to deal with this realization. His intense emotions hassle with his mental state. "Rat Kiley was crying. He tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself." (O'Brien, 76)

Mary Anne Bell

Although Mary Anne is not a major character, she plays an important part in the story, especially when it comes to symbolism. Mary Anne Bell is Mark Fossie's high school sweetheart. She is the symbol of loss of innocence. She arrives at Vietnam as an innocent girl, where she later disappears and shatters Fossie's illusion of somehow finding comfort in a piece of his past.

Emotional aspect: Mary Anne's devotion to Mark Fossie is what brings her there in the first place. At first, she is fascinated by the setting of the war, eager to learn more about how the war proceeds and what happens out in the field. As she stays there, she begins to feel like she is home, like this is where she is supposed to be. "To tell the truth, I've never been happier in my whole life. Never." (O'Brien, 95)

Mental aspect: As Mary Anne begins feeling comfortable in such a hostile environment, the soldiers begin to worry about her. She goes through mental and even physical changes. One night, she disappears and goes out on ambush with Green Berets. After she comes back, she gets into a fight with Fossie, which is the last thread of her past life. She leaves their group of men and disappears into the violence of the war. Even though she comes back, the description of her comeback is very similar to a ghost. "It was nearly three weeks before she returned. But in a sense she never returned. Not entirely, not all of her." (O'Brien, 100)

Physical aspect: Mary Anne carries her innocence when she first arrives at Vietnam. Her only concrete possession is Mark Fossie, which is the main reason she is there. As she loses her innocence, she becomes less devoted to Fossie, and she chooses to be out on ambush with Green Berets rather than planning her wedding to Fossie after the war. "Once or twice, gently, Mark Fossie suggested that it might be time to think about heading home, but Mary Anne laughed and told him to forget it. 'Everything I want,' she said, 'is right here.'" (O'Brien, 94)

Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien carries the stories. He carries the memories of the people who never made it out of the war, or the people who still live with the war inside them. He claims that once you've

seen the consternation, the dread of a true war scene, you never really move on from it. Although the book is a recollection of his memories of the war, he does not hide away the fact that most of the war stories are not fully accurate. They fail to reflect the true prospects of the story, simply because the people who tell them are heavily affected by the atrocious nature of the war, which makes room for speculation. “In war you lose your sense of definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.” (O’Brien 78)

The way O’Brien remembers everything about the war, including the setting to the tiniest detail, is rather impressive. Even though the war happened a long time ago, O’Brien still carries it inside him. He still feels the guilt, the terror and the dismay to the fullest and has not been able to move on from the things that he had done while fighting the war. He finds it difficult to confess to his own daughter that he killed a man once, even though he knows he was not given a choice.

Emotional aspect: O’Brien admits in the book that he did not have enough knowledge to comment on the necessity of the war when he was first drafted. All he knew was that there was a lot of uncertainties about the war. The government held back information from their citizens, nobody knew whether Vietnam was a civil war or not, and there were one too many issues the American government was dealing with. “Young, yes, and politically naive, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons.” (O’Brien, 38) It took a lot to get himself to follow the draft and not exile to Canada to avoid it, which is a burden he carried throughout the war. He wanted to escape the draft by exiling to Canada, but he could not deal with the moral dimension of his decision which would affect his honor terribly if he actually gone through with it. He refers to himself as a *coward*, for

he refused to abandon his dignity by choosing to fight the war instead of running away. “I was a coward. I went to the war.” (O’Brien, 58)

Mental aspect: O’Brien writes about the man he killed during the war. The first thing that catches attention in this chapter is how vividly he remembers the incident, decades after. He remembers the face and poise of the guy, the setting and most importantly, how it all exactly went down. This is where he truly realizes that soldiers are not given a choice, they are being forced to fight. “He would have been taught that to defend the land was a man’s highest duty and highest privilege. He had accepted this. It was never open to question.” (O’Brien, 119) This realization is the reason why O’Brien is still not over the fact that he took a life. The guy he killed was simply a cog in the machine, a soldier that was programmed to defend his country regardless of his true feelings. O’Brien was the same way, because he never wanted to be drafted in the first place. In the war, killing becomes an instinct. “I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it.” (O’Brien, 127) When she was nine, O’Brien’s daughter, Kathleen, asked him whether he had killed anyone. However, O’Brien denied he did, because he did not know how to explain that he indeed killed someone to her little girl. He keeps writing war stories for this sole reason, almost as if he is trying to forgive himself for what he has done. “Someday, I hope, she’ll ask again. But here I want to pretend she’s a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories.” (O’Brien, 125)

Physical aspect: Tim O’Brien does not mention any certain physical possessions he carries during the war. However, he mentions various times that he carries war stories long after the war as if they are physical luggage. His memories of the war, and the stories he bares are all a part of him now, and he keeps them like they are concrete forms of reminders of the war. He is aware of

the fact the war made him the guy he is today, kind of like a rite of passage for him from a boy to a man. He refers to his old self as Timmy, who is now long gone as the war took his innocence and exuberance. He carries his friends, comrades, the land, memories, stories, the man he killed, the horror, the terror and he knows he will be carrying them until he dies. "I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story." (O'Brien, 233)

CONCLUSION

All soldiers bare different kinds of burdens, they all fight for their countries and their own lives. War is a concept underestimated by the society, and books such as this one brings us a step closer to understanding the true nature of war and how much effect it has on all of our lives. Although Tim O'Brien left the war decades ago, it still haunts him to this day. Soldiers carry their older lives with them throughout the war, and veterans carry the war with them for the rest of their lives.

The Things They Carried was particularly chosen to focus this essay on the issue most soldiers and veterans face, adjustment to warfare and if they survive; postwar trauma. The vivid description of the war setting, the diverse characterization, the accuracy of the historical context and the tone of the book are a few of the many aspects of this book that makes it unique. This essay was written solely to present the unjust nature of war by investigating characters and ways in which war has affected them. The physical, mental and emotional aspects of the war has been explained in depth in the essay, which means the researcher's initial goal has been achieved.

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