The Things They Carried Study Guide

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

First published in *Esquire* in August, 1986, and later collected in *The Best American Short Stories 1987,* "The Things They Carried" became the lead story in a book of the same name published in 1990 by Viking Penguin. Since Tim O'Brien had already established himself as a literary voice to be reckoned with, this collection of interrelated stories received a great deal of attention. The book quickly established O'Brien as one of the leading figures in Vietnam literature.

Critics and readers alike have paid considerable attention to the question of whether the events in the book are literally true or products of O'Brien's imagination. Though O'Brien has made it clear in interviews that he believes the truth in literature has nothing to do with what actually happened, the similarities between his writing and his experience in Vietnam are striking. When O'Brien published the disturbing and confessional article "The Vietnam in Me" in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1994, he sparked renewed interest in the connections between his life and his writing. His last two novels are set in the United States but still prominently feature the Vietnam veteran's experience.

Author Biography

O'Brien's life resembles many of his protagonists. Born October 2, 1946, and raised in the small town of Wortington, Minnesota, by his insurance salesman father and elementary school teacher mother, O'Brien's childhood and adolescence was marked by loneliness and isolation. When he was a student at Macalester College in St. Paul, however, he found a place in the antiwar movement and attended war protests and peace vigils. After graduating with a degree in political science and plans to reform government from the inside, O'Brien was drafted instead. Resisting the impulse to defect to Canada, the twenty-two-year-old O'Brien found himself in the infantry. Despite being awarded the Purple Heart for wounds he received, O'Brien loathed the war and everything about it, but it would become the catalyst and continuing inspiration for his literary career.

O'Brien wrote his first book, the autobiographical series of vignettes *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* while a graduate student in government at Harvard University. Since its publication in 1973, O'Brien has been a full-time writer and Vietnam a constant theme. In addition to *The Things They Carried*, the collection of interrelated stories that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990, O'Brien has published five novels. The most recent, *Tomcat in Love* was published in 1998 after a well-documented period of personal turmoil and artistic burnout. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Plot Summary

"The Things They Carried" recounts the experiences of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's infantry unit leading up to and following the death of one of the men, Ted Lavender, on April 16. A third-person narrator describes the individual soldiers by the items that they carry with them.

Lt. Jimmy Cross, the main character and platoon leader, carries the letters he receives from Martha, a sophomore English major at St. Sebastian's College in New Jersey. He uses the letters, photographs, and the small stone she has sent him as a way of connecting to the world outside of Vietnam. Though he is distracted and dreamy, he also carries "the responsibility for the lives of his men."

The other men in the platoon carry personal effects and good luck charms. The also share the burdens of combat, distributing the necessary equipment and weapons among them. Henry Dobbins, for example, the biggest man in the group, carries the M-60 machine gun, "which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded." He also "carried his girlfriend's pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter."

Lt. Jimmy Cross's platoon's mission in mid-April is to locate and destroy the tunnels in the Than Khe area south of Chu Lai that the Viet Cong used to hide in. Because they are required to search the tunnels before blowing them up, they draw numbers to see who will perform the dangerous and claustrophobic task of crawling through the enemy's tunnels. Lee Strunk draws the unlucky number, crawls down the opening and the rest of the men settle in to wait and hope. As hard as he tries to concentrate on Strunk and the tunnel, Cross can think only of Martha, imagining the two of them together "under the white sand at the Jersey shore." Strunk finally emerges, "filthy but alive," but "right then Ted Lavender is shot in the head on his way back from peeing."

The men put Ted Lavender's body on the chopper and take up their burdens once again. The first thing they do is march to the village of Than Khe and burn everything. Finally, after they stop marching for the night they begin to try to come to terms with Ted Lavender's death. Like the physical objects they carry, the men distribute the burden of Lavender's death both individually and collectively.

Kiowa wants to talk about Lavender's death, wants an audience for his memory of the event. Bowker wants to be left alone and not say a word about it. Lt. Cross weeps and digs furiously at his foxhole. He feels guilty "because he loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead." He knows that this shame "is something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war."

The next morning Lt. Cross burns all his letters from Martha as well as the photographs of her, realizing that "it was only a gesture." In the aftermath of Lavender's death, Cross vows to give up the daydreams and focus on his job as soldier and platoon leader,

"determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence." He believes that this is only possible if he "would dispense with love."

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Lt. Jimmy Cross carried letters from Martha, the girl he loved. She did not love him; he knew this, and yet it was thinking of Martha and looking at her photographs and letters that helped to remind him of home. Sometimes, his daydreams of Martha distracted him from patrol.

The other men in Alpha Company, we are told, carried many items of necessity. Henry Dobbins, a large man who liked to eat, carried extra rations. Dave Jensen "practiced field hygiene" and thus carried with him a toothbrush, dental floss, hotel soap, extra socks, and foot powder. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers and dope. Mitchell Sanders carried condoms; Norman Bowker carried a diary. The medic, Rat Kiley, carried comic books. Kiowa, a Native American and a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament from his father, a Sunday school teacher, and a hunting hatchet from his grandfather. They all carried other necessities, such as jackets, 5-lb. helmets, pocketknives and canteens of water.

It is explained that to carry something is to "hump" it, and that almost everyone humped photographs. Jimmy Cross carried two pictures of Martha in his wallet. One was a snapshot signed "Love," though he knew she didn't really love him. The other was a photo from the yearbook of Martha playing volleyball. Seeing her legs in the volleyball picture reminded Lt. Cross of her knee, and of how he touched her knee one night as they watched *Bonnie and Clyde*. He remembers how that knee felt, even though she'd made him remove his hand, and he wishes he'd have carried her to her room, tied her up and touched her knee all night long. The photographs always made him think of things he should've done.

Some of the things they carried were due to rank and field specialty. As Lieutenant, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars - and the responsibility for his men's lives. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried the 26-lb. PRC-25 radio. As the medic, Rat Kiley carries nearly 20 pounds of medical supplies, from morphine to plasma, with M&M's for the especially bad wounds. Henry Dobbins, being a large man, carried an M-60, 23 pounds unloaded. It was usually loaded, however, and Dobbins also carried between 10 and 15 pounds of ammunition. All of the men carried weapons of some sort, and most carried 25 rounds of ammo. They also carried grenades, and whatever they found along the way that could serve to help keep them alive.

Ted Lavendar was carrying 34 rounds when he was killed. Later, Kiowa said Lavendar fell like a dead weight under all he was carrying. Lt. Cross felt the pain of Lavendar's death, believing himself responsible. He felt he had been too distracted with thoughts of Martha.

The week before Lavendar was killed, Lt. Cross had received a letter from Martha that contained a pebble. She had found the pebble, she said, on the Jersey shoreline, where land meets water, where things "came together but were separate," and had picked it up for that reason. Lt. Cross began to carry the pebble with him "on march," usually under his tongue, and romanticize all the things he and Martha could be doing together. This sometimes distracted him from his duties.

The day Ted Lavendar was killed, the men were on a routine mission to search out and destroy the tunnel complexes in Than Khe. Before exploding the tunnels, someone would have to go in and search them. Nobody wanted this task, so they would draw numbers for it. On this day, Lee Strunk was chosen. Everyone waits for him to emerge, and Jimmy Cross begins to imagine the worst - until his thoughts turn to Martha. Suddenly, she is all he can think about. Finally, Lee Strunk emerges, and while he is celebrating, Ted Lavendar is shot in the head.

The narration switches again, and again we are told of things the soldiers carried. They carried superstitious items, such as rabbit's feet. Norman Bowker carried a thumb Mitchell Sanders had cut off of a dead Vietnamese boy. They carried items for special occasions; they carried essentials and non-essentials. Most importantly, they carried things metaphorically, such as their fears, their memories, the land - and each other.

After Lavendar's death, Lt. Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe and they destroyed everything. Later, when he was alone, he wept for the loss of Lavendar, for which he felt responsible, and for the loss of his idealistic vision of Martha. Somewhere else, Kiowa continues to retell the story of how Lavendar looked when he was shot, like dead weight. The men, as a group, have learned to cope with the constant death around them by de-sensitizing themselves with crude euphemisms and jokes.

The next day, Lt. Jimmy Cross burned his letters and photographs from Martha. He knew it was a senseless gesture; he could not burn away the blame he felt for Lavendar's death, and he had the letters memorized anyway. This was his way of burning away his civilian life - this would make him a soldier, he felt. After this, he became much more regimented, much more disciplined. He made the decision to be a leader.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter serves to set up many of the themes and tones of the entire work. Not exactly a novel, but not specifically a collection of short stories, this work of fiction captures the disjointed, surreal quality of Vietnam. In this chapter, we see the juxtaposition of Jimmy Cross, an all-American guy with typical aspirations about his college sweetheart, against the harsh reality of the things he and his platoon carry to survive. A recurring theme throughout these stories is truth, and what truth really is. Here, Jimmy's truth is, for a while, centered on Martha; even though he admits to himself she does not love him, the bigger truth is the fantasy he creates around her. The

death of Ted Lavendar not only pounds home the reality of death, it also forces Jimmy to face the reality of his life; he is a soldier now, and he must lead his men.

Reality also comes into play as we see how the men deal with death. By using terms such as "offed" or "lit up," they cope with the reality around them - that their own lives are at stake all the time. They tell jokes, they make the dead seem alive, only to make themselves less afraid.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter introduces the reader to the narrator, who is also the author, Tim O'Brien. Tim says that many years after the war was over, Jimmy Cross came to visit him. They talked about the war, about the men in their platoon; Jimmy admitted he had never forgiven himself for the death of Ted Lavendar. After awhile, the two men switched from coffee to gin and got a little drunk.

With some alcohol in him, Tim decided to ask Jimmy about Martha. He showed Tim a photograph of Martha, just like the one he used to carry from the yearbook. He told him that she had given it to him at a college reunion. He had told her that he loved her; she did not respond, but she obviously did not reciprocate his feelings. In the end, Tim tells Jimmy he would like to write a story about all of this, and Jimmy agrees. He asks Tim to make him "brave and handsome, all that stuff," but not to mention anything about some incident we are not privy to. Tim agrees.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Here is where we begin to see the post-war against the backdrop of the war. We see that Jimmy has carried his guilt, and his love, for years. It is unclear what exactly he does not want Tim to mention.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Even with all the horrors of war, Tim remembers there were also some good times. During one, Azar gave a candy bar to a little boy with a plastic leg; during another, Mitchell Sanders mailed an envelope of his own body lice to the draft board in Ohio. He remembers Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins playing checkers, and how the checkers seemed to take on significance.

At 43, Tim says that he is a writer now, and that the war gets harder to remember with the passage of time, but the bad things that happened seem to replay over and over. But, he notes, it wasn't all that way.

For instance, he remembers how when Ted Lavendar was high on tranquilizers, he would be very happy and mellow. Or the time they got an old Vietnamese man to guide them through a mine field - they loved him by the time they were through the field.

He remembers that often, even with death all around them, they were bored.

He admits that he still feels guilty sometimes, 43 and still writing war stories. They're not all bloody stories, though; some are happy. In one, a soldier goes AWOL and "shacks up" with a Red Cross nurse. Tim remembers another story about Norman Bowker wishing his father didn't care so much about medals, and he remembers Kiowa teaching Rat Kiley to do a rain dance. He remembers that Ted Lavendar once adopted a puppy until Azar blew it up - Azar appropriately points out that he's "just a boy."

Tim remembers other things, as well, things that seem to be miniscule details: the smell of a body bag, a quarter moon, Henry Dobbins singing quietly. A memory that is described, but not at length, is of a slim, young, dead man, and of Kiowa trying to convince Tim that he didn't have a choice; we assume that Tim killed the young man.

Tim explains that stories are for "joining the past to the future." Remembering sometimes leads to a story, which makes the thing being remembered last forever.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The theme of reality is further explored here through the use of memory. By committing these memories to a story they become true, because in the world that is the story-world, they are reality.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 begins with Tim stating that he is about to tell a story he has never told anyone, because he has always felt it would cause too much embarrassment. This is something he has lived with for over twenty years. It is a hard story to tell, he believes, because all of us like to think that if a situation arises in which bravery is called for, we would react with courage. He had always felt that courage was like a resource that could be saved up for the right occasion, and that by storing it away, when the time came, he would use it to be a brave hero.

In 1968, a month after graduating from college, he was drafted. He was not especially politically active, but he had done a little in the way of protest, and he did have a sense that the war was wrong. Somehow, though, he felt he was above the war, and that it did not really touch his life. He was not a soldier - blood made him queasy. He felt that he had his whole life ahead of him, planned out, and that he was too good to go fight.

We learn that Tim spent the summer of 1968 working at a meat-packing plant. His job was to remove blood clots from the necks of dead pigs. It is bloody, tedious work, and he comes home every day smelling of pork. He spends the summer feeling isolated and adrift, desperate not to go to Vietnam because, quite simply, he does not want to die. Some wars, he believes, are justified, but not this one, and he especially does not want to die for a wrong war.

It is during this time that he begins to seriously consider going to Canada. He is torn; on one hand, he is afraid to go to war, on the other hand, he is afraid of the exile and ridicule that would come with *not* going to war. He feels angry, bitter, terrified and sick inside.

Then, one day, while at work, he cracks. It is as if he can physically feel something break inside him. He leaves the plant, goes home, showers and packs his suitcase. With one last look at his home and all that is familiar, he writes a note to his parents and leaves.

Soon he is on the road, driving north toward Canada. He does not really have a plan, and is running pretty much on adrenaline. He drives for a long time until finally, exhausted, he begins to look for a place to pull off and rest. Around noon, he pulls into an old, weary looking fishing resort called the Tip Top Lodge. It is here that he meets 81-year-old Elroy Berdahl, the man he says, "saved his life."

Tim and Elroy spend six days together at the lodge, and during that time, the older man asks nothing about the personal life of his younger companion. The two men pass the time quietly, playing Scrabble and doing chores around the cabins. At one point, Tim asks what he owes for his stay. Elroy calculates $400, then accounts for wages earned

based on chores Tim has done - he winds up figuring he owes Tim about $115. Tim doesn't take the money, but the next day he finds an envelope containing $200 on his door in an envelope marked "Emergency Fund," which indicates that Elroy knew what he was planning to do.

On the sixth day, Elroy takes Tim fishing out on the Rainy River. After about fifteen minutes, they enter Canadian water, and Tim realizes that Elroy had planned it that way. He is setting the stage for Tim to make a decision. While Elroy busies himself on the other end of the boat, Tim tries to will himself to jump overboard and swim to Canada. He can only cry, however, as he imagines all the people cheering him from the shore to make one decision or the other. He does not jump, and realizes that it may have been the braver choice to run and face ridicule than to stay simply to avoid it.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter once again highlights the ongoing theme of what is real - here, it is the notion of what really is brave or heroic. Tim begins the story in such a way that we are led to believe he is ashamed for not wanting to go to war, for temporarily running. It seems though, as the story progresses, that he is more ashamed of his inability to run, of his fear of exile and embarrassment. In the end, he even says, "I was a coward. I went to war."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

One day, Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk get into a fistfight because Jensen believed Strunk had stolen his jackknife. Jensen, much bigger than Strunk, manages to break the smaller man's nose. Under normal circumstances, things might have ended there, but Vietnam has made Dave Jensen paranoid, and he believes Strunk is out for revenge. Finally, he can't stand it any longer, so he breaks his own nose with the butt of his pistol and asks Strunk if they are now square with each other. Strunk agrees, but in the morning he laughingly says, "The man's crazy .... I stole his ... jackknife."

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter and the next are very short and, in some ways, work together. In chapter 5, we see how the war distorts what is true - Strunk wasn't after revenge, but Jensen's belief that he was drove him to enact the revenge upon himself. The irony was, his initial belief, that Strunk had stolen his jackknife, was actually true, so Strunk probably felt Jensen was justified in fighting him.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

After this, Jensen and Strunk become close friends, doing everything together. They even go so far as to draw up a pact between them that if one of them sustains a life altering wound, the other will end his life for him. Then Strunk steps on a mine and loses half a leg. His main concern is that he will tell Jensen not to kill him; Jensen says he won't. When Strunk dies en route to a hospital, Jensen seems relieved of an enormous weight.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Because we have seen the progression of their friendship from chapter 5, we know there is a unique bond here. In some ways, it seems Jensen and Strunk were trying to hold on to some sort of reality with this bond; by making the pact, they seem to acknowledge danger in a way most of the men do not. However, when faced with the reality of their pact, neither man appears ready to accept his part.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The chapter begins with a story about how Rat Kiley wrote a letter home the sister of his best friend who was killed during the war. He tells her stories about what a good guy her brother was, what a great soldier. Then he gets more serious, telling her how much he had loved him, his best friend, "like a twin or something." He never heard back from her. This is how you can tell it is a true story; there is no moral. A war story with a moral or happy ending is not to be trusted.

The man Rat is writing home about was named Curt Lemon. One day, Rat and Curt were playing catch with smoke grenades, the goal of which was not to be the one to chicken out and throw the grenade, which is essentially harmless. Suddenly, however, there is a noise, and as Curt Lemon steps out from under the trees, he seems to disappear. Tim says that this is often the way with war stories, that when you look away from what is happening, and then look back, there is confusion about what actually occurred, and the confusion becomes the truth. Some stories, he says, are almost beyond words.

An example of this is a story told by Mitchell Sanders. He tells of a group of soldiers who are sent on a weeklong mission to listen for the enemy - nothing else, just listen. This task becomes more and more difficult, though, as the men are not allowed to make a sound. Eventually, they begin to hear things, like music and talking, which intensify into a full-blown cocktail party, complete with clinking champagne glasses. Finally, the men can't stand it any longer, and they order the entire mountainside burned and destroyed. When asked to explain the attack, the men can only stare silently at the colonel. The moral of the story, Sanders says, is that nobody listens.

A true war story, Tim says, is believed with the stomach - it must ring true in your gut. After Curt Lemon's death, the soldiers find a baby water buffalo. They try to feed it, but when it does not eat, Rat Kiley shoots it in the knee. The animal does not die, and suffers in silence, as Rat shoots it repeatedly, not to kill it, but to cause pain. Even the jaded soldiers are shocked at the cruelty, but Mitchell Sanders sums it up: "Over here, every sin's fresh and original."

Tim believes that there can be no generalizing in war, because truths often conflict with each other. He explains that true war stories can still be true, even if they never occurred. He gives an example of the story of a soldier who jumps on a grenade to save his fellow soldiers. The answer to whether this story is true or not lies in determining if its truth matters.

Tim says that he tells the stories in public from time to time, and sometimes, people tell him that they enjoyed them. Often, he says, it is the older women, and they are especially fond of the water buffalo tale. They miss the point entirely, though, by telling

him he should put the war behind him. Mitchell Sanders was right - nobody listens. The story wasn't about war; it was about love.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter encapsulates one of the major themes of the entire work - what is reality? Here, Tim is trying to explain the reality and false reality of telling a war story, emphasized with stories of characters in his story telling war stories. Though he says that a "true" story cannot have a moral, he creates a paradox, because even stories with no moral have a moral. The reality of these stories, along with others throughout the book, is not the reality of what truly happened, but the reality that exists in our reactions. Do the stories *feel* true? If they do, they are true.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Tim remembers Curt Lemon, but he says he found it hard to mourn his death. He thought Curt was a bit of a show-off and a bragger, and that he tended to take things too far. Tim says that before he gets sentimental, he'd like to tell a Curt Lemon story.

One time, the men were working in an area they called the Rocket Pocket. For them, it was like a two-week vacation; there were beaches and palm trees, and everything was quiet. The higher-ups had to have them doing something, though, so they sent in a dentist to check the soldiers' teeth. The young dentist lectured them on proper oral hygiene, then set up what amounted to a dental assembly line, with soldiers taking a turn getting work done quickly.

As they wait, Curt Lemon seems to get more and more nervous. He explains that in high school, he had experienced some extremely bad dentistry, "[t]orture chamber stuff" he calls it. He even says he isn't going to take his turn, but when his name is called, he does head toward the dentist tent. Before the dentist touches him, Curt faints. Afterward, he sits off to himself, a little dazed, angry with himself.

Later that night, after everyone is asleep, he goes to the dentist and tells him he as a toothache. The dentist examines him and finds nothing, but Curt insists he is in horrible pain, so the dentist numbs him up with Novocain and pulls one of his front teeth. In the morning, Curt seems happy and satisfied with himself.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Both truth and bravery are touched upon in this story. We see how truth can be distorted, even in one's self image, through Curt Lemon. Even Tim admits that Curt's boasting is the result of an opinion of himself that is too high or too low. With the dentist story, it seems we are to believe it is too low. Though usually a risk-taker, Curt chickens out with the dentist. His late night trip to the dentist's tent is an attempt to prove to himself that he is brave, that he is indeed the character he has created. Curt's reality is the reality he makes for himself, and in the world in which he does something that makes him, to himself, brave, he is actually brave.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

This chapter centers on a story told by Rat Kiley. First, though, Tim has to explain that Rat Kiley was prone to exaggeration, that he tended to, "heat up the truth ... [so] that you would feel exactly what he felt." For Rat, "facts were formed by perception, not the other way around." For this story, though, Rat never backed down. Mitchell Sanders was disbelieving - nobody could just fly their girlfriend into Vietnam - but Rat insisted he had seen it with his own eyes, a pretty young girl in a pink sweater and white culottes.

Rat had started out his service in Vietnam in a medical unit near Tra Bong. It was bloody work, but not very dangerous, and there were no officers, so it was a pretty stress-free set-up. Nearby is a camp of Green Berets, but they do not socialize and are more like silent, predatory animals.

One night, during a routine card game, the medics start discussing the idea of bringing women into the camp. They joke about it, but one man named Mark Fossie won't let it go. He goes on about how it can be done, and six weeks later, his 17-year-old girlfriend Mary Anne Bell shows up in a helicopter with the daily re-supply shipment. She had just graduated from high school, and Rat said she was very pretty and friendly. The other men questioned Fossie about how he managed such a feat and he explained, saying it was a bit difficult but in a way, it was easy, because you just had to want it bad enough.

Mary Anne and Mark had been sweethearts since the sixth grade and were planning a life together after he got out of the Army. Their idyllic plans would probably have played out, Rat said, had their lives gone along the normal paths. As it was, the two set up house in a bunker together, and for the next two weeks, they were sickeningly in love, spending all their time together. The men were envious, but they genuinely liked Mary Anne, because she was fun, flirtatious and willing to pull her weight around camp. She was also curious about the war and the people of Vietnam; she even gets Mark and some of the men to take her on a tour of a Vietnamese village.

She was smart, Rat said, and when casualties came in, she was right in there helping with everyone else. She wasn't afraid of the gore, and she even seemed fascinated by it. She was very good at the work she did, and soon, she adapted to life in the camp by abandoning her make-up and jewelry, wearing her hair in a bandana, and learning to use an M-16.

On the surface, things between Mary Anne and Mark seemed the same; they were still sleeping together and they still held hands around camp. Mary Anne, however, had started speaking more vaguely about their marriage plans, and twice she had come in very late. Finally, one night, she did not come in at all, and Fossie enlisted Rat to help him find her, convinced that she was probably sleeping with someone else. They did not find her.

Here, Rat pauses in his story, asking his listeners to guess where she was. Mitchell Sanders correctly deducts that she was with the Green Berets, but, Rat explains, she was not sleeping with them, not in a sexual way - she was patrolling with them, lying in wait for an ambush. When she does come in, after sunrise, she hugs Mark quickly and tells him not to say anything, that they'll talk later: he responds by yelling, "Not later .... Now!" No one knows what happened after that, but Mary Anne began dressing better, cleaning herself up, and she wouldn't talk about her time with the Green Berets. Also, they were now engaged.

Their relationship, though, seemed distant, and everyone expected it to end. Mary Anne became depressed when Mark began to arrange for her to go home and withdrew even further into herself, until finally she disappears during the night and joins up with the Green Berets again. When she returns three weeks later, she is a different person with "jungle fierceness" in her eye.

Rat pauses again to comment, and Mitchell Sanders expresses his annoyance. He feels Rat is ruining the story's tone by commenting on it. Rat argues that he didn't think it was that complicated.

Back to the story, Rat continues. He tells of how Mark Fossie went and waited outside of the "Greenie" camp to see Mary Anne, reasoning that she had to come out some time. Rat warns him about messing with the Green Berets; then, they hear Mary Anne singing along with a record in what sounds like a foreign language. Mark finally runs into the tent, where he finds a world totally unexpected - candles and incense, the head of a leopard on a post, bones everywhere. It is a primal world, and Mary Anne is right there in the middle of it.

She is wearing her normal clothes, a pink shirt and cotton skirt. Her jewelry choices have changed considerably, however; around her neck, she wears a necklace of blackened human tongues. She tells Mark Fossie that she knows what he thinks, but it's really not that bad. He is incredulous, but she goes on, telling him he is in a place he doesn't belong, and that he just doesn't know Vietnam. She continues on:

Sometimes I want to *eat* this place ... I want to swallow the whole country - the dirt, the death - I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like ... this appetite .... When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark - I'm on fire almost - I'm burning away into nothing - but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am.

Rat takes Fossie out of the tent, and soon they hear Mary Anne singing again. Fossie feels he must do something, that he can't just let her go like that. Rat wisely points out that she is obviously already gone.

Rat stopped there in his story, which again infuriated Mitchell Sanders, who demanded to know what happened to the girl. When Rat tells him he doesn't know for sure, as he was shipped out to join his current company about four days later, Sanders tells him you

can't tell an elaborate story like that and have no ending. Rat tells him to have patience - he has an ending of sorts, but it's from a third-hand account. Before telling it, though, he admits that he had loved her - all the guys had - because she reminded them of home. Also, though, because she was there, "up to her eyeballs in it," and she understood more than the girls at home ever would.

From what he heard from someone who had heard it from one of the Greenies, Mary Anne loved night patrol, and she was very good at it, though she took chances that even some of them thought were crazy. Sometimes she would disappear for hours or days, until finally, she walked off and never came back. She was never found, and there was an inquiry, but the Greenies believed she was still out there, watching them from the shadows, part of the land.

Chapter 9 Analysis

There are two themes in this chapter that are recurrent throughout these stories; one is seen in the story of Mary Anne, the other in Rat Kiley's retelling of the story. In Mary Anne's story, we see the harsh reality of what war can do. Faced with the closeness of death, Mary Anne becomes addicted, as if to a drug, to the adrenaline rush of cheating death. She goes deeper and deeper, from helping the medics to spending time with the Green Berets, then joining up with them, until she is so far gone she is unrecognizable.

With Rat's storytelling, we again deal with reality and truth. He would exaggerate in his stories, not to make them better, but to make them truer, because for him, truth was in feeling, and he wanted to convey the feeling of the event more than the facts. Mitchell Sanders, who is always the one to point out the moral of a story, is irritated by this, as he is committed to the story's structure - for him, truth lies in the integrity of how the story is presented.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Henry Dobbins is a good man; not that sophisticated, but a large, good-hearted man. Around his neck, Dobbins wears a pair of his girlfriend's pantyhose. They are a reminder for him of the comforts of home. They also serve as a talisman of sorts; at first, the men joke about this but when Dobbins repeatedly avoids harm, they all begin to believe. Eventually, Dobbins' girlfriend breaks up with him, but he is fine, and tells the soldiers he still loves her, and that the magic doesn't go away. They are all relieved.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Again, this chapter deals with the power of reality and the reality that can be created from a story. The men know in their minds that the pantyhose are not really protecting Henry Dobbins, but they create a reality around them that makes them seem magical. In the end, they are relieved because Dobbins allows them to continue to believe in the fantasy.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

One afternoon, the men come across a pagoda occupied by two monks. Kiowa warns them that it's wrong to set up at a church, but they do set up camp, and it is a peaceful time for them all. The monks are happy and pleasant, and seem honored to have the men staying with them. They are friendly to everyone, but seem especially fond of Henry Dobbins.

Dobbins tells Kiowa that he might decide to join the monks when he finishes his tour of duty. He says when he was younger, he considered becoming a minister, not because he was overly religious, but because he wanted to help people. He knew he wouldn't be any good at the sermons, he just wanted to be nice to people. He asks Kiowa if he had ever thought of becoming a minister, since he carries the New Testament and never swears. No, he says, but he does like churches, because they are peaceful; again, he says it seems wrong to set up in a church. As they finish cleaning and assembling their guns, Dobbins agrees, telling Kiowa that all they can do is be nice to people and treat them decently.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter emphasizes the humanity these men still have, even amidst all the death and violence. Henry Dobbins' desire to be a minister, or a monk, is simple and unselfish; he simply wants to "treat people decent."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Tim describes a man he killed-detailing how the deadly wound destroyed his face. He goes on to create a whole life for the slim, dainty young man, a life in which he liked books and math, and was only a soldier out of a sense of family duty. Tim cannot stop staring at the dead young man, and he fixates on certain details, such as the star-shaped hole through one eye. He also continues to add to the young man's imagined life, giving him a fear of war, a life at the university, and a girl to love.

As Tim continues to stare at the body, Kiowa, who is with him, begins to get uneasy. He tries to convince Tim that ho had no choice but to shoot the young man, that everyone else would have done the same thing. He also tries to get him to stop staring. He tries to get Tim to leave with him, or at least to talk to him, but Tim can do nothing but stare at the man he killed.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Tim has no way of knowing anything about the young man he killed, and yet he makes up an entire, detailed life for him. This becomes, for the reader, the truth of the man's life. Though it may not be actual fact, it is the truth, because it feels true. Also, it is what Tim needs to process that he has taken a life; while most people would work to de-personalize the body, he works to give the body humanity in order to ground himself in reality.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Tim begins this chapter by recounting the day his daughter, Kathleen, asked him if he had ever killed anyone, since he was always writing war stories. He tells her of course not, but he writes that someday he hopes she'll ask again, so that he can tell her what really happened, and that she was right - that was why he kept writing war stories.

The man he killed was a slender man of about twenty. Tim says he was afraid of the young man or of something, and as he passed, Tim threw a grenade at his feet.

They had been working in two-man teams, one keeping watch while the other slept. It was Tim's turn, and after about half an hour, he saw the young man walking down the road in front of him. Almost automatically, Tim moved into position, pulled the pin and threw the grenade. There was no real peril, as the man would probably have passed by without even seeing him. Kiowa tries to tell him it was a good kill, but Tim says now that sometimes he can forgive himself and sometimes he can't. Sometimes he imagines seeing the young man, and in his daydreams, he walks away unharmed.

Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter serves to explain why Tim is driven to write war stories. He killed a man who was no threat to him, which was no act of valor or bravery, simply an automatic reaction to intense, irrational fear.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

This is another very short chapter. The men encounter a young girl of about 14, and she is dancing, though there is no music and her entire hamlet has burned down. She dances slowly with a smile on her face, which seems to irritate Azar, who repeatedly asks, "Why's she dancing?" He finally says he just doesn't get it and writes it off as some kind of ritual - no, Henry Dobbins says, she just likes to dance. Later, when Azar mocks the girl's dancing, Dobbins picks him up and asks him if he wants to be dumped into a well. When he says no, Dobbins says, "All right, then ... dance right."

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter shows that the soldiers are not unique in their ability to slip away from reality and create their own truth in order to cope. The young girl has used this coping mechanism to deal with the loss of her village, home and family; she is in a world where she is at peace. Henry Dobbins, who in an earlier chapter emphasized the importance of treating people nicely, understands this. Ironically, though he is always the first to avoid the reality of death by making a joke, Azar is unable to comprehend the girl's state of mind.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Norman Bowker spends a lot of time driving around his town now that the war is over and he is home. It is a typical town, with modern houses and barbecue grills, and there is a popular lake where residents of the town enjoy spending their time during the summer. Before the war, he used to drive around the lake with his girlfriend Sally Kramer, and he'd swam in it with his friend Max Arnold, who liked to debate ideas and who had, in fact, drowned in the lake.

Now, Sally is married, Max is dead, and he is left driving aimlessly around the lake. He imagines a story he might have told his father, if his father were not so involved in watching a baseball game on television. It is a story of how he believes he almost won the Silver Star in Vietnam.

It had rained for a solid week, and the Song Tra Bong was overflowing with mud. One night, in this mud, he says he was not brave. He pauses in the story he is telling to his father in his head, and as he drives around, imagines asking others if they'd like to hear his story. Finally, he continues.

They had been on the march, and were camping in a big swampy field next to the river. A group of Vietnamese women had run out, warning them that it was a bad place for them to camp, but Lt. Jimmy Cross had shoo-ed them away. The field was a soupy mess, but the thing Norman remembers most is the smell - the field was the village toilet. During the night, they were fired upon - the field was exploding all around them. Norman heard someone screaming and realized it was Kiowa. He sees him sinking into the muck, and tries to pull him out by grabbing on to his boot, but it is an impossible task, and Kiowa sinks beneath the sludge. Losing Kiowa in that muck, Norman says, is how he lost his Silver Star.

When his imagined conversation is over, Norman pulls into an A&W and orders a burger, fries and a root beer. After he is finished, he alerts the man on the intercom that he is done. Norman starts to tell the man his story, but stops short; ironically, the man is actually willing to listen. Norman leaves, drives around a bit more, then stops at the lake. Here, he wades out into the relatively clean water, fully dressed, and watches the Fourth of July fireworks show.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Truth, in this story, resides in Norman Bowker's head. He could not have saved Kiowa, who had most likely died before sinking into the mud, but in his own self, because he feels that he let Kiowa slip away, that is what really happened. Like the story where Jimmy Cross felt responsible for the death of Ted Lavendar because he was too fixated on Martha, Norman feels he himself was too fixated on the smell and the cold to save

Kiowa. He seems to want to share his story, but he doesn't believe anyone would really want to hear it; when someone *does* want to listen, he shies away from the opportunity, perhaps afraid that someone who was not actually there would absolve him of his guilt.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Tim begins "Notes" by saying that "Speaking of Courage was written at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who hanged himself three years later. Norman, it seems, had written a letter to Tim, telling him he had tried a series of jobs, and had even enrolled in community college for a short time, but that nothing ever felt real or tangible, and that he always wound up quitting. He was spending his time driving around town and playing basketball at the Y, and he felt he just couldn't get his act together. He wants Tim to write a story about a guy who can't let go of what happened in that field of muck, a guy who wants to talk about it but can't.

Tim realizes he has been overly smug, believing he had left the war behind him because he didn't really dwell on it in everyday life, while all along he was constantly writing stories about it. These stories, he feels, are not exactly therapy for him, but they have helped him deal with things that would have paralyzed him otherwise by separating things that happened, and didn't happen, from himself and recording them.

Norman's letter haunted Tim, and he wrote a short story based on Norman's experience after the war. He did not use his name, nor did he use the mud field, the rain or the death of Kiowa; he placed everything in a set of circumstances that fit with the story he was writing at the time. Immediately, he felt the story was lacking. He managed, though, to forget the story's flaws, and eventually, when the story was published in an anthology, he sent a copy to Norman Bowker, who is disappointed and bitter that he left out all the details. Eight months later, Tim says, Norman hanged himself at the Y after a basketball game.

This story is the story of what actually happened to Norman in that field. Tim makes it clear, though, that Norman did not really freeze up or lose the Silver Star. That story, Tim says, is his own.

Chapter 16 Analysis

It is unclear, with his last line, whether Tim is referring to the fact that the story of Norman losing the Silver Star is his own creation, or if he means the story itself happened to him, not Norman. Either way, this chapter illuminates the power of story-telling, explaining that even in its ambivalence, it can convey truth by conveying feeling and emotion. Norman, in some ways, seems to understand this even before Tim, as it is not until Norman asks for his story to be told that Tim discovers how much the telling of these war stories has done for him.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

It is the morning after the night in which Kiowa was lost in the field of village sewage, and the men, especially Lt. Jimmy Cross, are determined to find his body. Lt. Cross doesn't think it's right that such a good man be lost in such a field. He wishes the rain would let up, then realizes that it just part of the war. As they all search, he looks out and sees a young soldier who seems to be looking for something he dropped in the muck. Lt. Cross feels he made a mistake by camping in this area.

Out in the field, the men search for Kiowa. Azar tries to make his usual jokes, but Mitchell Sanders and Norman Bowker are having none of it. They know there is nothing they can do for Kiowa now, and tensions are high as they just want to get it over with. Walking along, Mitchell Sanders suddenly stops, reaches down, and pulls out Kiowa's rucksack. They feel they should tell Lt. Cross, but Sanders feels it was the LT's fault for camping them there in the first place.

About 50 meters away, Lt. Cross is still trying to compose a letter in his head to Kiowa's father. He thinks of how he had not really want to be a soldier, and how he really didn't want the responsibility of leading a group of men. He ponders telling Kiowa's father that his son's death was his entire fault. Then he sees the young soldier out alone again, and he wades out to the middle of the field.

The young soldier, we learn, was a good friend of Kiowa's. The night before, they had been sitting together, and the young soldier had turned his flashlight on to show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. At that moment they were fired on, and the soldier blames himself, especially because he tried to pull Kiowa out of the field by his boot, but he could not. When Lt. Cross approaches him, he says he is looking for his girlfriend's picture; he is frantic, and Lt. Cross feels sorry for him and silently wishes him luck before continuing to write his letter to Kiowa's father.

Across the field, the men are trying to get Kiowa's body out of the muck, but he is immovable. Finally, they start digging around his body, and eventually are able to get him free. They clean him up, assemble his things and call it in. Later, Azar apologizes for his jokes, saying that when he saw the body, he felt responsible, as if Kiowa could hear him. Norman Bowker says it was nobody's fault.

Back with Lt. Cross and the young soldier, the LT is still thinking about his letter, while the soldier wants to confess to what he feels was his part in Kiowa's death. Lt. Cross is lost in his own mind, however, thinking about how there is always someone to blame but how it can be anyone or anything. He floats in the sludge, daydreaming about home and oblivious to the helicopter coming to take Kiowa's body away

Chapter 17 Analysis

It is unclear who the young soldier is here, or if he exists at all. He could, in fact, be Tim. Or, he could be the blame personified - Lt. Cross spends a lot of time thinking about blame, and it is said that blame must always fall somewhere. It is interesting to note that there are so many people willing to take on blame for Kiowa's death - when in the reality of the facts, he had already been shot down when he sank into the field.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

This chapter is really only one page in the book, yet it explains a lot. Tim says that he is a 43-year-old writer, and that he was once a foot soldier who walked along the Quang Ngai Province; everything else is invented. He says there really was a man who was killed the way he described killing the young man on the road, but that he was only present, he did not do it himself. Then, he says, even that story is an invention. He says there were many faceless, nameless dead in Vietnam, and he was never able to look. By writing these stories, he is able to see and name them. He says that when Kathleen asks him if he killed anyone, he can say, "Of course not"; he can also say, "Yes." Both are true.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Here we begin to see a more complex view of the ties that bind these stories together. What is true and what is invented? As Tim has said all along, that may not matter. Do we feel cheated if they didn't really happen? No, because the feelings were true, even if the specifics were created.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

After writing "In the Field," Tim decides to take a field trip of sorts and takes his daughter on a tour of Vietnam. Tim takes Kathleen, 10, to the field where Kiowa died. She doesn't understand why they are there, and though Tim says she is very patient throughout the trip, she does call him weird for his obsession with something that happened so long ago. For his part, the field seems smaller, and is very different from his memories.

Tim says that he wanted Kathleen to see more than just the tourist section of Vietnam, which is one reason they visit the field. Another reason is that he wanted to leave Kiowa's grandfather's hatchet in the spot where Kiowa died. He goes into the muck, and Kathleen is confused as to why he would go into something so dirty and smelly. He feels he should say something profound but doesn't know what. When an old farmer raises his shovel in a fierce manner at Tim, Kathleen asks him if the man is angry with him; Tim says no, "that's finished."

Chapter 19 Analysis

This chapter seems to point to the fact that the young man of "In the Field" may well have been Tim. It also shows how distorted reality can be, whether because of a lapse of 20 years time, or of a difference in the mindset of a Vietnam vet and his 10-year-old daughter.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Tim was shot twice during the war. The first time, he was tended to by Rat Kiley, who knew exactly what to do and came back to check on him several times. He was airlifted to the hospital, and when he got back 26 days later, there was a new medic named Bobby Jorgenson. When Tim is shot the second time, it takes Jorgenson so long to muster the courage to get to him that he almost dies of shock; to make it worse, Jorgenson botches dressing the wound, and Tim develops gangrene on his butt. As he recovers in the hospital, all Tim can think of is revenge on Jorgenson, especially because he feels his wound is humiliating due to its placement. After this second wound, he is transferred to a re-supply unit, which is a much safer company. He is happy in some ways, but misses the excitement of Alpha Company.

At one point, his old platoon comes to where he is. They tell him stories about things that have happened since he left, but Tim still feels separated from the group. His main concern, however, is to find out where Bobby Jorgenson is. Mitchell Sanders tells Tim to let it go, that Jorgenson made a mistake but that he's a good medic now; he also says he's part of the group now. Tim understands that this is also meant to say that he is not. He runs into Jorgenson later, who tries to apologize to Tim for his mistakes.

Tim is even more angry that Jorgenson's apology has made him lose a bit of his thirst for revenge. He tries to enlist Mitchell Sanders to help him with his plan, but when he refuses, Tim gets help from Azar, who nobody, including Tim, likes or trusts. They plan to scare Jorgenson, and though Tim does have some last-minute doubts, he goes ahead with the plan. Jorgenson will be on night watch, so they fix some ropes outside of his tent that will rattle the attached cans when pulled, causing Jorgenson to believe he is surrounded by the enemy. They scare him for awhile, then take a break. When they go back, they shoot off some flares, causing Jorgenson to jump up and yell in fear. Now, Tim knows that Bobby feels what he felt when he was shot.

Tim wants to stop now, but Azar will not. He pleads with him, but Azar says they have to finish the job. Tim feels a lot like he did when he was shot as he tries to get Azar to stop, as if everything is moving in slow motion. Azar goes on with the plan, all the while taunting Tim. He throws a tear gas grenade into the tent and uses a pulley to lift a white sandbag into the air. Jorgenson firsts shoots, thinking the sandbag is the enemy, then realizes what is happening and shouts out Tim's name. Azar taunts Tim some more for whimping out and kicks him in the head. Tim and Jorgenson make peace as Jorgenson tends to Tim's wound and they ponder what they should do to Azar.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The events in this chapter are not as important as Tim's state of mind. He is angry at Jorgenson, and no doubt spent a lot of time planning his revenge on him, but it is not this anger that drives him to his plot. He is jealous of Jorgenson for taking his place with the platoon, and in the war. By scaring him, Tim feels part of the war again; he realizes, however, that he doesn't really want to be.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

The men of Alpha Company were on a mission in which they could only travel at night and sleep in the day. The nights were completely dark, and all of the men began to be affected. Rat Kiley was affected the most; he started thinking bugs were crawling all over him and he would claw at his own skin. He also admitted that he would often imagine what other people's internal organs looked like. He even began to picture his own body, blown up. Finally, he knows he needs to leave, so he shoots himself in the foot. Everyone understands.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Bravery is touched upon here. While many would say that Rat acted out of cowardice, it was indeed an act of bravery, in that he saved himself instead of worrying about what the others would think. The other soldiers acknowledge this with their warm good-byes, perhaps wishing they had the courage to do the same.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Tim says that he feels sometimes stories can both save people who are still alive and bring people back from the dead. He feels he can dream them alive. He mentions Kiowa, Ted Lavendar, Curt Lemon, someone named Linda, and the dead Vietnamese. One of these dead men, an old man they found in a burnt down village, was his first dead body of the war. The other men make a big show of shaking the old man's hand and talking to him, even toasting him, but Tim cannot join them. Later, Kiowa commends him for being able to stand up to them, but Tim says he wasn't being brave, he was scared. "Same difference," Kiowa tells him. Tim tells Kiowa that seeing the body reminded him of his first date.

Linda, we learn, was Tim's first love. They were nine, and he makes it a point to say it was not just a crush, it was real, adult love. He remembers that they went on a double date to the movies once, with his parents, to see the movie *The Man Who Never Was*, and that Linda wore a red cap that he felt was sophisticated. In the movie, British soldiers put incriminating false documents in the pocket of a dead man, who washes up on a German beach. The body is found by Nazis who use the false information, allowing the British to win the war. Tim is much more interested in the dead body. After the movie, they got something to eat at the Dairy Queen.

Even at school, Linda continued to wear the red cap every day, and every day, she was teased by a boy named Nick Veenhof, who repeatedly threatened to pull the cap off. It seemed relatively harmless, but then one day Nick pulled the cap off, exposing that Linda was bald except for a few tufts of hair and some stitches. She was composed, and looked at Tim: "It lasted only a moment, but I had the feeling that a whole conversation was happening between us. *Well?* She was saying, and I was saying, *Sure, okay*." Nothing changed between them.

At 43, Tim realizes that in many ways, he is the same Timmy he was in the fourth grade at his essence. As a writer, he wants to save Linda's life, "not her body - her life."

Linda had died, at nine, of a brain tumor. Tim's mother had gently explained the condition to him, and had eventually given him Linda's fatal prognosis. When Linda did die, Tim learned about it from Nick Veenhof on the playground. He left school and went home where he sat in his living room and tried to will her alive. In a dream-like state, he imagined he saw her and he began to cry; she tells him not to be sad and that she is dead.

Interwoven with the memories of Linda are memories of the way the men treated the dead in Vietnam, the way they would humanize them to make them seem still alive.

The day of Linda's viewing, Tim asked his dad to take him to the funeral parlor. When he works up the nerve to look at her, he is shocked that she looks big and bloated, not at all like herself. After that, he began going to bed earlier and earlier because, in his dreams, he could talk to Linda. Sometimes he even wrote down his dreams, the events and the dialogue, which made them into stories. These stories kept Linda alive. As a writer, this is what Tim has always done - he writes of the dead to keep them alive. He writes of his life to keep himself alive.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Timmy's dreams, in which he willed Linda into existence, grew up to be Tim's stories. By taking real people, even if they did not have the same names or their details were different, and placing them in situations that *feel* real, Tim is able to keep them alive forever. He is also, in this way, able to save his own life.

Characters

Norman Bowker

The member of the platoon who is described as "gentle," Bowker carries a diary with him. The other unusual thing that he carries is a thumb from the body of a dead Viet Cong boy.

Jimmy Cross

Lieutenant Cross is the main character of the story and the one whose inner thoughts the narrator most often presents to the reader. He is more educated than the rest of his men but seems reluctant to assume the burdens of leadership. He carries photographs, letters, and a pebble given to him by Martha, a college girl he knows back in New Jersey and with whom he believes himself to be in love.

Henry Dobbins

The biggest man in the platoon, Dobbins carries the heaviest physical load, the M-60 machine gun.

Because of his size, however, he is exempt from taking his turn crawling in the enemy's tunnels. He carries canned peaches and other extra rations on patrol.

Dave Jensen

David Jensen "practiced field hygiene" and therefore carried dental floss, "night-sight vitamins high in carotene," and foot powder. He also brings soap stolen from a hotel in Australia where he had been for rest and relaxation, and a rabbit's foot.

Rat Kiley

The medic for the platoon, Kiley carries all the necessary supplies for practicing emergency field medicine as well as some unconventional ones such as comic books, M & M candy, and brandy.

Kiowa

An Indian from Oklahoma, Kiowa is a devout Baptist and travels with the New Testament his father gave him. He also carries "his grandmother's distrust of the white man," a pair of moccasins, and a feathered hatchet.

Ted Lavender

Because he is scared Lavender always carries tranquilizers and "six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity." He is shot and killed while the platoon waits for Lee Strunk to emerge from the tunnels.

Martha

Martha is a junior at St. Sebastian's College in New Jersey. Before Lieutenant Cross was shipped to Vietnam she formed at least a superficial relationship with him, but her letters are more friendly than romantic.

Mitchell Sanders

The radio operator for the platoon, Sanders has the responsibility of calling for the chopper to pick up Lavender's body. He gave Bowker the amputated thumb from the corpse of the dead Viet Cong boy.

Lee Strunk

Introduced late in the story, Strunk draws the unlucky number seventeen and has to inspect the tunnels at Than Khe. Among the personal items that he chooses to carry are a slingshot and tanning lotion.

Themes

War and Love

Readers might expect the story to articulate the tension between war and peace, but O'Brien's point in this story and in his other writings is that the real connection is between war and love. Lt. Cross believes, for example, that because he loves Martha, he does not fulfill his duty toward his men. He literally thinks that because he chose love over war, Ted Lavender is dead. O'Brien believes, however, that love comes with the territory of war. In an article for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1994 he explains: "Intimacy with death carries with it a corresponding new intimacy with life. Jokes are funnier, green is greener. You love the musty morning air. You love the miracle of your own enduring capacity for love."

According to O'Brien, however, love is also what drove him to Vietnam. In the same article he confesses: "I have done bad things for love, bad things to stay loved." Describing his reaction to being drafted he writes: "I thought about Canada. I thought about jail. But in the end I could not bear the prospect of rejection: by my family, my country, my friends, my hometown. I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love."

The Individual and the Collective

One of the central themes of all war narratives, and particularly Vietnam war literature, is the dynamic between the individual soldier and the unit, or collective, of which he or she is a part. The object of military training is to meld individuals into a functioning group, a platoon, by instilling in them both fierce loyalty to and dependence upon the others. Properly trained soldiers know that their lives depend on the actions of others, and at the same time they are also willing to risk their own lives for the sake of the rest. In "The Things They Carried" the members of Lt. Cross's platoon act collectively in several ways. They share the burdens of carrying necessary equipment and draw lots to see whose turn it is to search the tunnels.

Collective action during wartime has a dark side, however. The official language of war uses collective nouns like troops, in order to disguise the involvement of individual bodies. For example, news that Alpha Company suffered "one casualty" is more palatable than news that Ted Lavender is dead, shot in the head on the way back from peeing. O'Brien's narrative explicitly engages this theme by contrasting the plurality of the platoon with the singularity of the men. In other words, they are all legs and grunts and they all must carry heavy burdens as well as each other, but in the privacy of their thoughts and the inner sections of their backpacks and pockets they are singular men with hometowns and girlfriends and fathers and mothers.

Storytelling: Fact or Fiction

Like most of the literature of the Vietnam war, "The Things They Carried" is shaped by the personal combat experience of the author. O'Brien is adamant, however, that the fiction not be mistaken for factual accounts of events. In an interview with Michael Coffey of *Publishers Weekly* soon after the book was published, O'Brien claims: "My own experience has virtually nothing to do with the content of the book." Indeed the title page of the book announces it as "a work of fiction." The book is dedicated, however, "to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." O'Brien himself was in infantryman in Alpha Company and was stationed in the Quang Ngai province in 1969-70. When asked about this device in an interview with Martin Narparsteck in *Contemporary Literature*, O'Brien explains: "What I'm saying is that even with that nonfiction-sounding element in the story, everything in the story is fiction, beginning to end. To classify different elements of the story as fact or fiction seems to me artificial. Literature should be looked at not for its literal truths but for its emotional qualities. What matters in literature, I think, are the pretty simple things—whether it moves me or not, whether it feels true. The actual literal truth should be superfluous."

Clearly O'Brien wants readers to wrestle with the distinctions between fact and fiction. What matters for him, as he explained at a conference on the literature of the Vietnam War, is the "power of stories, whether they're true, or embellished, and exaggerated, or utterly made up. A good story has a power . . . that transcends the question of factuality or actuality." In the beginning of the last story in *The Things They Carried,* O'Brien reveals the reasons why he tells these tales: "Stories can save us." Offering a fuller explanation in an interview with *Publishers Weekly,* O'Brien says, "If there is a theme to the whole book it has to do with the fact that stories can save our lives."

Style

Point of View and Narration

The identity of the narrator in all the stories in *The Things They Carried* is of interest to critics and readers. In the title story, the narrator is unidentified, but in other stories he is a "fictional character named Tim O'Brien," explains the author, Tim O'Brien. The third person narrator in "The Things They Carried" is unnamed, but since the stories are interrelated, he may be the fictional Tim O'Brien. The narrator's job in this story is to describe the soldiers and the things that happen to them in the Quang Ngai province, particularly on and around the day that Ted Lavender dies. The narrator is technically omniscient, or all-knowing, since he is privy to the interior thoughts and feelings of the characters, especially Lt. Jimmy Cross. But O'Brien's narrator also behaves like a limited third-person narrator in that he only reveals partial, fragmented, or incomplete information about the characters and events of the story.

Realism

One of the stylistic features of O'Brien's story is its precise rendering of the physical realities of war. This style falls under the general literary category known as realism, one of the most elastic terms critics have to work with. The term applies both to the method of accurately describing the details of ordinary life as well as a general attitude, or philosophy, that favors confronting the realities of life instead of escaping or idealizing them. An example of realism in both senses is the way O'Brien portrays Ted Lavender's death. He includes considerable and precise detail (how much and what he was carrying, and that he had not even zipped up his pants, for example). O'Brien also goes to great lengths to characterize Lavender's death as a random and stupid accident, not as a heroic act.

Because realism is such a large term, it includes several varieties. The two variants of realism most often associated with O'Brien's work are hyper-realism and magic realism. The story can be considered hyper-realism because O'Brien draws attention to the minutiae of the soldiers' lives in Vietnam, lingering over details smaller than an ordinary observer could perceive. The story also contains elements of magic realism. Magic realism is a kind of modern fiction that weaves fantastic or imaginary elements into a narrative that otherwise has all the features of an objective realistic account.

Historical Context

The War in Vietnam

Historians often refer to the Vietnam War as America's longest war because it can be dated from President Harry Truman's commitment of $15 million to aid the French forces in Indochina in 1950 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. The reasons the U.S. became involved in Vietnam are complex. Briefly, American policy makers beginning with the Truman administration believed that the spread of Chinese Communism in Southeast Asia threatened the world balance of power as construed by the cold war. The so-called "domino theory" held that the entire region would "fall" to communism if the U.S. did not support South Vietnam against incursions from the north.

For several years the U.S. aided the south Vietnamese with technology, material, and military advisors. Intensive American involvement in Vietnam began in 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. Marines to defend Danang airfield. More than 15,000 American military advisors were already in Vietnam. By the beginning of 1968, there were nearly a half million American troops in Vietnam, and bombing raids were heavy and frequent. Communist troops altered the course of the war early in 1968 when they launched a series of attacks on the eve of Tet, the Asian New Year holidays. Americans knew then that victory would come neither soon nor easily.

The years 1969-70, when "The Things They Carried" is set, mark the phase of the war called "Vietnamization." In 1969, President Nixon began secretly bombing Cambodia, a strategy that in-flamed anti-war protesters in the United States. American troops were steadily withdrawn while heavy bombing continued. Frustrations with the war escalated both at home and among the troops themselves. Though it was not revealed until a year later, in March of 1968 American troops burned the village of Mylai to the ground and killed "everything that breathed." In the words of journalist and author Stanley Karnow: "In human terms at least, the war in Vietnam was a war that nobody won—a struggle between victims. Its origins complex, its lessons disputed, its legacy still to be assessed by future generations. But whether a valid venture or a misguided endeavor, it was a tragedy of epic dimensions."

The War at Home

The years 1968 and 1970 were especially turbulent on the domestic front. As opposition to the war grew, protests became larger and more highly charged. In response to the threat of violence, authorities increased police presence on college campuses and at demonstrations. Within two months in the spring of 1968, both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. There were riots and arrests outside the Democratic convention in Chicago. Television viewers watched as heavy-handed police and national guardsmen beat and tear-gassed protesters.

Early in 1969, Nixon began withdrawing troops but also began secretly bombing Cambodia. Massive anti-war demonstrations took place in Washington in October and November. Also in November, Americans were shocked by the revelation of the massacre at Mylai. By 1970 the antiwar movement had spread cross the country and clashes between protesters and law enforcement were more frequent and highly-charged. In May, national guardsmen killed four students protesting the war at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

By 1970, as Stanley Karnow explains, resistance to the war at home began to affect the troops in the field. "Antiwar protests at home had by now spread to the men in the field, many of whom wore peace symbols and refused to go into combat. Race relations, which were good when blacks and whites had earlier shared a sense of purpose, became increasingly brittle." Similarly, the image of the American GI began to suffer in the eye of the American public as more tales of brutality and drug use emerged from the battlefield Aided to a great extent by the erection of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and a greater public understanding of the causes and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, the image of the Vietnam veteran has improved in the past twenty years. In the 1970s, however, returning soldiers faced unprecedented difficulties reintegrating into their communities and families. Veteran John Kerry, later elected to the U.S. Senate from Massachusetts, recalls his own experience on a cross country flight: "I fell asleep and woke up yelling, probably a nightmare. The other passengers moved away from me—a reaction I noticed more and more in the months ahead. The country didn't give a shit about the guys coming back, or what they'd gone through. The feeling toward them was 'Stay away—don't contaminate us with whatever you've brought back from Vietnam.'"

Critical Overview

Tim O'Brien made something of a splash in the literary world when his *Going After Cacciato* beat two much more high-profile books by John Cheever and John Irving to win the National Book Award in 1979. *The Things They Carried* more than lived up to the expectations of the critics when it appeared in 1990. Though reviewers debated whether the book was a novel or a collection of stories, there was little disagreement that it was an important and accomplished work.

Michael Coffey of *Publishers Weekly* interviewed O'Brien and previewed the book a few weeks prior to its publication. Coffey insists that the book is "neither a collection of stories nor a novel [. . .] but a unified narrative, with chapters that stand perfectly on their own (many were award-winning stories) but which together render deeper continuities of character and thought." Coffey also predicts that *The Things They Carried* "may be the masterwork" that O'Brien's earlier books suggested he was capable of.

When Robert Harris reviewed the book for *New York Times* in March, 1990, he called the book a "collection of interrelated stories." More importantly, however, Harris also claimed that *The Things They Carried* belonged "on the short list of essential fiction about Vietnam," and "high up on the list of best fiction about any war." Harris puzzles a little over O'Brien's blurring of fact and fiction in his use of a narrator also named Tim O'Brien, but concludes that the author "cuts to the heart of writing about war. And by subjecting his memory and imagination to such harsh scrutiny, he seems to have reached a reconciliation, to have made his peace—or to have made up his peace."

O'Brien's reputation has continued to grow in literary circles. Two full-length studies and several critical articles on his work have been published in the 1990s. Martin Naparsteck in *Contemporary Literature* calls O'Brien "the best of a talented group of Vietnam veterans who have devoted much of their writing to their war experiences," and suggests that *The Things They Carried* will soon surpass O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* as the best work of fiction to come out of the war. Writing in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* Maria S. Bonn praises the "elaborate interlocking pattern of truth and fiction" in *The Things They Carried.*

More recently, O'Brien generated considerable interest in his work and his personal experience when he accepted an assignment from *New York Times* to return to Vietnam in 1994 and write about it. The article called "The Vietnam in Me" renewed interest in *The Things They Carried* because it described O'Brien's real-life experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry. The *New York Times* article also stirred interest in O'Brien's fictionalized accounts of his Vietnam experience because in it he confessed his own suicidal thoughts as he wrestled with the memories of the war, a divorce, and the break-up of another relationship. O'Brien received quite a bit of attention for this bit of self-revelation and in a 1998 interview with *New York Times* writer Bruce Weber, he explains: "I'm glad I wrote it, but I wish I hadn't published it.[. . .] It's a perceptive piece, about the inner penetration of love and war, and eerie uncanny

similarities between the two. But it hurt people I love, and probably me too, a little. Though it saved my life, in one way."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton has a Ph.D. in American literature. In this essay she discusses the blending of the real and unreal, the tangible and the imaginative, in "The Things They Carried."

The title story of *The Things They Carried,* which O'Brien himself describes as "sort of a half novel, half group of stories," dramatizes the lives of foot soldiers in Vietnam during the later years of the war. O'Brien characterizes them as "legs," or "grunts," as those who carry burdens both literal and figurative: from photographs and tranquilizers to shame and responsibility. The story, like the lives of the men in Lt. Cross's platoon, depends on a delicate balance, upon "poise," to use O'Brien's term. Walking a blurred line between fact and fiction, the story requires readers to balance the physical and the metaphysical worlds as well and challenges their definitions of reality.

The narrator guides readers throughout the story, sometimes just describing and enumerating the soldiers' world, and sometimes departing from the path of realism to dwell in the soldiers' imaginations. The narrator carries the burdens of the men's stories and implicitly asks readers to take them up as well. As critic Thomas Myers writes in *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*: "The soldier's own testimony was a story waiting for a storyteller, a tale whose ultimate message would reside in its tone and style as much as its content. If the Vietnam War was a dark monument to the powers of American imagination, so would imagination be the most necessary tool for its faithful recording." Because the particular qualities of the Vietnam war experience "defied conventional attempts to record it," in Myers's words, O'Brien, like other writers of the war, must find forms outside "the well-worn contours and conventions of the traditional war [narrative]," Myers continues. One of the new techniques O'Brien employs is to describe the grunt's experience not in terms of *how* he carries on, but simply in terms of *what* he carries. For example, because Jimmy Cross outranks the others, his "humping" duties are lighter: "a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45 caliber pistol that weighted 2.9 pounds fully loaded." Compared to machine-gunner Henry Dobbins, he gets off easy. Lt. Cross, however, also carries "the responsibility of the lives of his men." Ted Lavender, the narrator notes, "went down under an exceptional burden" when he was shot and killed. After listing all the heavy objects that Lavender carried, the "more than twenty pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers," O'Brien adds one more item, even heavier than all that precedes it because it lacks a specific weight and therefore is infinitely heavy—"the unweighed fear." Readers apprehend the weight of fear because its intangibility contrasts with the specified and quantified weights of his other burdens.

The soldiers in Lt. Cross's platoon *are* what they carry. They are grunts because they carry ammunition and flares and water and rations and guns. The things they carry also holds the group together. Each man depends upon the other to share the load. But they are also defined as men, differentiated from the group because of the things they carry. The objects that comfort them individually may also alienate them from the others. Rat

Kiley, for example, as medic must carry all the necessary supplies, but he also carries M&Ms "for especially bad wounds." His intimate knowledge of death—that sometimes candy is the only comfort in a dying man's final minutes—separates him from the men who hope and pray that they never ask for the M&Ms. Ted Lavender's heaviest burden, his crippling fear, is a burden he shares with the others, but his means of coping with that fear, his tranquilizers and "six or seven ounces of premium dope," set him apart. Carrying drugs would certainly not make Ted Lavender exceptional in Vietnam, but his dependence upon the drugs makes his fear visible and that is what distances him from the others. All of them "carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide." Ted Lavender makes his own fear, and therefore everyone's fear, visible. The most poignant example is Lt. Cross himself, whose love for Martha pulls him away from Vietnam on imaginative flights: "Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and he smothered." After Lt. Cross blames himself for Lavender's death and burns the letters and photographs from Martha, he realizes "you couldn't burn the blame." His alienation from the group now derives from his understanding that "you could die of carelessness and gross stupidity," and that he is responsible for the others. He experiences this choice between Martha and his duty as a loss: "It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." In other words, the things they carry on their bodies creates the illusion of unity and collaboration, but the fragile collective is always compromised by the things they carry inside and by the meanings and emotions attached to the smallest and most private of artifacts.

One of the most effective techniques O'Brien uses in "The Things They Carried" is to juxtapose the physical and the metaphysical burdens, the real and imaginative experiences of the men of Alpha Company. Vietnam literature has sought to move away from the heroic, or romanticizing, war narratives of the past. This has resulted in a literature that privileges gritty realism and attempts to describe the intimate details of the material and bodily conditions of the soldier's lives. Since the very nature of their efforts seem to have no objective and no meaning, they defy conventional narrative. The men of Alpha Company are engaged in "an endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march." The soldier's experience in O'Brien's fiction is intensely physical, often reducing the men to mere bodies. For them, "the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility." Paradoxically, however, the intense physicality of the soldier's existence engenders the dreamlike states that Lt. Cross is susceptible to and that characterize the story as a whole.

By describing the things the soldiers carried as a mixture of the mundane and the metaphorical, O'Brien creates a dizzying sense of unreality: "They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections." After O'Brien lists some of the ordinary items that the soldiers carried, "chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries," he wrenches the reader beyond the tangible world: "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." In what Myers describes as "the feel of the worst dream becoming real," the soldiers' world has become inverted and the sky rests on their shoulders and even gravity needs help.

When the weight of their burdens, both concrete and psychic, become too much for them, Lt. Cross and the other men take off on imaginative flights. Because real escape is impossible, the only alternative is imagination, and in this story they dream of "freedom birds," of becoming the thing carried instead the grunt. Literally, freedom birds are the planes that take a soldier out of the country, either at the end of his one year tour of duty or to the temporary relief of the hospital or some rest and relaxation. But like the things the men carry, the bird itself is both real and unreal: "it was more than a plane, it was a real bird, a big sleek silver bird with feathers and talons and high screeching." The soldiers dream of having "nothing to bear," of inhabiting "the vast, silent vacuum where there were no burdens and where everything weighed exactly nothing." O'Brien's language specifically invokes the image of putting aside burdens, of weightlessness: "at night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne." Of course, O'Brien also means to suggest that the men dream of being "born" as well, of being delivered and returned to innocence.

In the end, Lt. Cross is not carried away to a world without gravity; he still has the burden of his responsibility to his men as well as the weight of grief and shame from Lavender's death. He decides to do the only thing that he can: repack and shift the weight so that it will be more bearable. After he burns Martha's' letters and photographs he vows "to do what they had always done," but this time with "no more fantasies." In the same way that they often discarded in the field what they no longer needed, Lt. Cross swears to "dispense with love," to put it aside as an unnecessary burden.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, "An Overview of 'The Things They Carried'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the physical and emotional weight of the Vietnam War on a group of soldiers.

Tim O'Brien first emerged on the literary scene with his starkly moving portrayals of men involved in the Vietnam War. When his award-winning novel *Going After Cacciato* was published, John Updike wrote felt, moving experience of the war, published almost a decade later, may well be that masterpiece. At first critics did not know how to view *The Things They Carried*—as a collection of short stories or a novel? Neither, says O'Brien, who prefers to look at it simply as a work of fiction. In truth, it stands as a unified narrative, made up of chapters that can work on their own, but which, together, provide a deeper meaning and look into the lives and battles of the soldiers. *The Things They Carried* relates the stories of the men in Alpha Company. It features a narrator, called Tim O'Brien, who has many commonalties with the author Tim, but O'Brien maintains that the story is "all made up."

Along with several other stories that would be incorporated into the book, "The Things They Carried" first appeared as a short story in *Esquire.* As the opening piece for *The Things They Carried,* it sets the stage for the narratives that will follow. It does more than introduce the reader to many of the soldiers of Alpha Company and establish their unity, however; it also introduces the reader to the completely unimagined world that is war. In this world anything can get turned around. A gentle man can carry a thumb of an enemy boy-soldier as a talisman or a man can get shot to death in clear sight of all his fellow company.

"The Things They Carried" presents dual narratives: numerous lists of the things, both tangible and intangible, that the soldiers carry with them on their march, intermingled with the guilt felt by Alpha Company's commanding officer, Jimmy Cross, over the death of the soldier Ted Lavender. In many ways, the lists form a framework on which the rest of the narrative hinges, but the two story lines are inextricably linked. Jimmy feels that he has put his love for a college girl back home ahead of his men; as atonement and as prevention, Jimmy must burn her letters and photographs, physical symbols of his destructive love.

Through the burdens carried by Jimmy Cross and the rest of the men, "The Things They Carried" successfully juxtaposes the soldiers' physical reality against their emotional reality. So the things they carry are not limited to the tools of war, such as weapons, jungle boots, and mine detectors, but also to what each man finds to be a personal necessity—dental floss for one man, comic books for another. O'Brien's deliberate prose, here sounding like parts of it could have been lifted from a military report, emphasizes the physical load of the soldier—"P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water." It also puts emphasis on the

sheer weight of the soldier's load: the M-16 gas-operated assault rifle that "weighed 7.5 pounds unloaded, 8.2 pounds with its full 20-round magazine"; Mitchell Sanders's PRC-25 radio was "a killer, 26 pounds with its battery"; and Henry Dobbins, a big man and the machine gunner "carried the M-60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded." As Steven Kaplan points out, the way in which O'Brien "catalogues the weapons the soldiers carried, down to their weight [makes] them seem important and their protective power real." This is simply an illusion; Lavender, killed by sniper fire, "carried 34 pounds when he was shot," 9 more than the typical load carried by most of the soldiers, as well as more than 20 rounds of ammunition.

At times the men choose to "discard things along the route of the march." The text states that they do this "Purely for comfort," knowing that a resupply chopper would arrive by nightfall, but this action functions symbolically as well. Only by stripping themselves of the physical gear of the war can they achieve a feeling of freedom, however momentary it might be, and catapult themselves out of Vietnam. Truly, the men recognize the delusional nature of their fantasy, for they know that "they would never be at a loss for things to carry." The implication that they will be carrying their experiences once they return also appears here, in the narrator's evocation of "the great American war chest," which includes Fourth of July sparklers, Easter eggs, and the forests of Minnesota.

The weight under which the men struggle cannot be lightened by the discarding of war equipment, for it extends far beyond the physical reminders; hardest of all, they carry "all the emotional baggage of men who might die" and "shameful memories" and the "common secret of cowardice barely restrained." These they carry on the inside. On the outside they are hardened men, tough, able to joke about Lavender's death. "A pisser, you know?" says Kiowa. "Still zipping himself up. Zapped while zipping." They bitterly deride men who leave the war by shooting off their own toes or fingers, but "even so the image played itself out behind their eyes." Only in their sleep can they truly let down their guard. This night-time fantasy includes what they called a "freedom bird," a big bird that carries them away from Vietnam. Then "the weights fell off; there was nothing to bear"; they no longer carry their weapons or each other, instead "they were carried, they were purely borne." Only in these fantasies can they free themselves of their many burdens; instead of carrying the weight of the war, they are now carried by a creature that is larger, more powerful, and more mystical than themselves.

Because this is only fantasy and the men cannot escape the realities of war, they are forced to carry with them their ideals of home. In Kiowa's case, this comes in the form of an illustrated New Testament. Jimmy Cross's ideals of home, fantasies of a girl back home, simply serve as deadly distractions. He carries a "compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45-caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded . . . a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men." Yet, most important to Jimmy Cross are the letters he carries from a college girl named Martha. For Jimmy, Martha represents the world of peace; she is unsullied by the war experience—"she never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy take care of yourself"—and unmoved by it —"She wasn't involved" (either in the war itself, Jimmy's experience of it, or the relationship between she and Jimmy). Despite her position outside of Vietnam, Martha

plays an important role in Cross's perception of the progression of events played out in the story. After Lavender is shot "on his way back from peeing," Jimmy Cross decides that he is at fault. For just as Lavender was about to be shot, Lieutenant Cross "was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore." In response to Lavender's death, Jimmy Cross burns Martha's letters and resolves to be a better leader. This resolve is less for the men, who will resent this stricter line of command, than for himself; Cross knows that "Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war." Cross will become a real solider; that is the only way to carry the weight of his guilt.

Jimmy Cross concludes that his imagined world has put the lives of his men at risk. "Imagination was a killer," states the text, and here the imagined world and the world of battle are starkly differentiated. Cross's self-perceived negligence and his guilt provide what Lorrie Smith calls an "inexorable equation: imagination = women = distraction = danger = death." Smith suggests that Cross's dramatic resolution at the end of story is his recovery of masculine power achieved only through the suppression of the femininity within himself. Because the emotion of love becomes a feminine characteristic in times of war, Cross's rejection of it requires his embrace of the ultra-masculine. Thus after Lavender's body has been taken away, "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything." This wanton act of destruction, itself reminiscent of the actual My Lai massacre, exemplifies not the violence of the war but what can happen when the soldiers stray from the masculine sphere and allow themselves to *feel.*

The reader may disagree with Cross's conclusion that his fantasies about Martha leads to Lavender's death. The text merely says that at the time that Lavender was shot, "Lieutenant Cross nodded and closed his eyes" while the other men cracked jokes. The crucial issue here, however, is not the physical realities of the circumstances surrounding one soldier's death but its emotional implications. Cross sees the events in stark, black-and-white terms: Martha or his men. There is no room for compromise in the world he now inhabits. Only 24 years old and not a risk-taker, as demonstrated by his chaste relationship with Martha, Cross has the safety of his men in his hands, and he cannot juggle two priorities; as the text states, "He was just a kid at war, in love." Cross's method of symbolic reasoning finds further emphasis in his digging of a foxhole that night and crawling inside, thus repeating the fantasy playing out in his head in the moments before Lavender's death. There he comes to the realization that Martha "did not love him and never would," a fact obvious to the story's readers.

With his love for Martha forbidden to him—or at the least, transformed into a "hard, hating kind of love"—Jimmy Cross turns to what can substitute as its closest opposite. He decides to initiate a new start for Alpha Company. Determined to mold both himself and his men into ideal soldiers, he will demand more discipline of them. He will no longer let them "abandon equipment along the route of march" although he acknowledges that "there would be grumbling . . . because their days would seem longer and their loads heavier." Cross's recognition that the men have lost their soldierly comportment comes at the same time as his recognition that it is *his* world, not Martha's world, that is real. Cross has allowed his men to carry too much of the world of peace

with them, where feelings and emotions do not carry with them the power of death. "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor."

When asked in an interview to choose his favorite story from *The Things They Carried,* O'Brien said that "on most days, or three days out of seven in a week" he would choose "The Things They Carried." O'Brien likes "the cadences of the story, the sounds and rhythms . . . the physical items that form the story's structural backbone . . . the absence of much of a plot in the thing." In many ways, "The Things They Carried" is a pure warstory. It has camaraderie, despair, violence and death, duty, longing and desire. "It was very sad," Jimmy Cross thinks, "The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." In the world of Vietnam and the world of "The Things They Carried," there is little room for anything else.

Source: Rena Korb, "The Weight of War," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Smith contends that the dramatic resolution of "The Things They Carried" "turns on recovering masculine power by suppressing femininity in both male and female characters," and that female characters in O'Brien's work are often only plot devices.

In both the opening and closing stories of [*The Things They Carried*], imagination is linked to an idealized, unattainable woman—Martha, a girlfriend at home, and Linda, a childhood sweetheart who died at nine. The first story plays one of the many variations on the imagination-reality motif and picks up where O'Brien's earlier novel, *Going after Cacciato,* left off, with Paul Berlin imagining himself pleading for peace at the Paris Peace Talks but admitting: "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits." "The Things They Carried" goes further to limit the imagination, asserting that in battle, "Imagination was a killer." What this means, on one level, is that the nerve-wracking tension in the field could lead soldiers to imagine the worst or make a fatal mistake. But the story also establishes an inexorable equation: imagination=women=distraction=danger=death. The story's dramatic resolution turns on recovering masculine power by suppressing femininity in both female and male characters. Survival itself depends on excluding women from the masculine bond. In this first story, the renunciation of femininity is a sad but necessary cost of war, admitted only after real emotional struggle. It establishes a pattern, however, for the rest of the book.

"The Things They Carried" introduces the cast of Alpha Company and establishes their identity as a cohesive group, each manfully carrying his own weight but also sharing the burden of war. The story features Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the platoon's 24-year-old C.O., who fell into the war via ROTC. He is presented as a man of integrity, honesty, and deep compassion for his men, a cautious, somewhat stiff and unseasoned commander with no inherent lust for death and destruction. The story is fundamentally an initiation narrative whose tension lies in Jimmy Cross's need to deal with guilt and harden himself to battle realities, which are here distinctly differentiated from the realm of imagination. Jimmy Cross's story alternates with lyrical passages cataloguing all the "things" men of war carry, including "all the emotional baggage of men who might die." These passages, echoing O'Brien's earlier constraints of "obligation," insistently repeat the idea that "the things they carried were largely determined by necessity . . . Necessity dictated."

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's survival and his coming of age as an effective soldier depend on letting go of all that is not necessary and immediate—here equated completely with the feminine, the romantic, the imaginary. Becoming a warrior entails a pattern of desire, guilt, and renunciation in relation to a woman. The story opens by describing in detail Jimmy Cross's most precious cargo:

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her but the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin, he was almost sure.

Martha's writing—and, implicitly, her reading of his war experience—are sexualized through association: her inability to respond to his love and his longing suggest the blank page of virginity in patriarchal discourse. Though Jimmy Cross tries to realize a connection with Martha through his sacramental/sexual ritual, she is represented as aloof and untouchable, a poet with "grey, neutral" eyes inhabiting "another world, which was not quite real." Martha's words are never presented directly, but are paraphrased by the narrator, who reminds us twice that she never mentions the war in her letters. Like other women in the book, she represents all those back home who will never understand the warrior's trauma. In addition to the letters, Jimmy Cross carries two pictures of Martha and a good luck charm—a stone Martha sent from the Jersey Shore, which he sometimes carries in his mouth; he also "humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps." As the story progresses, Martha—rather these metonymic objects signifying Martha—becomes a distraction from the immediate work of war and caring for his men. His mind wanders, usually into the realm of sexual fantasy: "Slowly, a bit distracted, he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin." Memory and desire intertwine in a fantasy

that fuses courage and virility and, by extension, fighting and writing upon her blank virgin page. In one of the book's several retrospective "should haves," Jimmy Cross remembers a date with Martha and thinks "he should've done something brave. He should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should've risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, the thought of new things he should've done." We are meant to see the move from chivalry to sadomasochistic erotica as natural and understandable, because "He was just a kid at war, in love," after all. That Jimmy Cross's sexual "bravery" might have been earned through violation and coercion is not considered in the story. The focus is on the male's empowering fantasy.

Jimmy Cross's distraction climaxes with the sniper shooting of Ted Lavender "on his way back from peeing." Just before this incident, the company had waited tensely for Lee Strunk to emerge from clearing out a Vietcong tunnel. The language of sexual desire and union, coming just before Lee Strunk's "rising from the dead" and Lavender's death, link Jimmy's imagination of Martha—his merging with the feminine—with annihilation of the self. As he gazes suggestively down into the dark tunnel, he leaves the war and succumbs to a fantasy of perfect union between masculine and feminine, death and desire:

And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted his to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her.

Such unraveling of gender duality, however, is dangerous, such paradoxes unsustainable. At the moment of Jimmy's imagined dissolution, Ted Lavender is shot, as if to punish himself for daydreaming and forgetting "about matters of security"—but more deeply for abandoning his men in the desire to know the feminine—Jimmy Cross goes to the extreme of rejecting desire for Martha altogether. He reacts to the trauma of Lavender's death in two significant ways. The first is one of the book's parallel scenes of My Lai-like retribution, here bluntly told but not shown: "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything." The second is guilt, entangled with anger that his love for Martha is unrequited. He reverts to a familiar binary choice—either Martha or his men: "He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry, like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war"—his good luck charm transformed to the weight of guilt. That night he cries "for Ted Lavender" but also for the realization, or perhaps rationalization, that "Mar-tha did not love him and never would." Jimmy Cross regains a "mask of composure" necessary to survive war's horror, burns Martha's letters and photographs in a purgative ritual reversing the opening blessing, and wills himself to renounce Martha and all she signifies: "He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love." With this rejection and a newly hardened, terse idiom, Jimmy Cross completes his transformation: "He was a soldier, after all.... He was realistic about it.... He would be a man about it.... No more fantasies . . . from this point on he would comport himself as an officer . . . he would dispense with love; it was not now a factor." His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity: "Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the day-dreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity."

How are we meant to read this rejection? O'Brien is not blaming Martha for male suffering, for of course, the story isn't *about* Martha at all, though she introduces the book's prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding war. Rather, he uses her to define "necessary" codes of male behavior in war and to establish Jimmy's "proper" bond with his men. We are given no rationale for why Jimmy perceives his choice in such absolute terms, nor are we invited to critique Jimmy for this rigidity, though we do pity him and recognize his naivete. Jimmy Cross's rejection of the feminine is portrayed as one of the burdensome but self-evident "necessities" of war, and O'Brien grants Jimmy this recognition: "It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." Most sad and ironic of all, Jimmy ends up suffering alone because of his status as an officer: "He would show

strength, distancing himself." Jimmy Cross's allegorical initials even encourage us to read his youthful renunciation in Christian terms.

At the very end, however, masculine bonds prevail and compensate for Jimmy's losses. O'Brien places the men of Alpha Company in a larger cultural landscape of men without women by alluding to cowboy movies and Huckleberry Finn: "He might just shrug and say, carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward villages west of Than Khe." The narrative voice here is very carefully distinguished from the characters, and it is hard to know how to take the conditional "might" and the self-conscious diction: as parody? as straight allusion? as Jimmy Cross's self-deluding macho fantasy? One possibility is that O'Brien means to expose and critique the social construction of masculinity, suggesting that soldiers' behavior in Vietnam is conditioned by years of John Wayne movies, as indeed numerous veterans' memoirs attest is true. Likewise, the story unmasks the soldiers' macho "stage presence," "pose," and "hard vocabulary": "Men killed and died, because they were embarrassed not to"; they do what they "felt they had to do." But these constructions are inevitably converted into behavior that seems natural and inevitable—"necessary"—within the urstory underlying all war stories: the tragic destruction of male innocence. O'Brien's depth as a writer allows him to reveal the socialized nature of soldiering and to show compassion for the vulnerable men behind the pose. But he stops short of undoing and revising these constructions. In the end, men *are* how they act, just as they *are* their stories and culture *is* its myths. The story rescues the humanity of men at war and consigns femininity to the margins, thus assuring the seamless continuity and endless repetition of masculine war stories.

Because Tim O'Brien's characters live so fully for him he is impelled to follow up the story of Jimmy Cross and Martha with a vignette, "Love." Like George Willard, the lonely but ever-receptive narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio,* O'Brien portrays himself as the burdened repository of other people's stories. Here Jimmy Cross comes to visit character-narrator Tim O'Brien "many years after the war" to talk about "all the things we still carried through our lives." One thing that Jimmy Cross still carries is a torch for Martha, and he shows the narrator a copy of the same photograph he had burned after Ted Lavender's death. The story embedded in the story concerns his meeting with Martha at a college reunion. Now a Lutheran missionary nurse serving in Third World countries, she responds to Jimmy with the same friendly but aloof demeanor that marked her letters during the war. She gives him another copy of the photo to gaze at and reveals "she had never married . . . and probably never would. She didn't know why. But as she said this, her eyes seemed to slide sideways, and it occurred to him that there were things about her he would never know." Despite her continuing inscrutability and distance, Jimmy risks telling Martha that "he'd almost done something brave" back in college, and he describes his knee-stroking fantasy. Martha's ambivalent reaction widens the gulf between men and women and hints, with Hemingway-like ellipses, that she is either repressed, fearful, uninterested, or a lesbian; in any case, she is unreceptive to Jimmy's advances, which absolves him from any failings or flaws as a masculine sexual being:

Martha shut her eyes. She crossed her arms at her chest, as if suddenly cold, rocking slightly, then after a time she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn't tried it. She didn't understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, the things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things. At breakfast the next morning she told him she was sorry. She explained that there was nothing she could do about it, and he said he understood, and then she laughed and gave him the picture and told him not to burn this one up.

What are "the things men do?" In the context of this pair of stories, these things are both sexual and violent. Jimmy passes this story on the narrator, joking that "maybe she'll read it and come begging." But he leaves more concerned about the reader's response than Martha's, with a plea that Tim depict him positively, as if he still hadn't exorcised his guilt over Lavender's death. "'Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.' He hesitated for a second. 'And do me a favor, don't mention anything about—' 'No,' I said, I won't.'" O'Brien teases us with an indeterminate ending; if he is true to his word, then he hasn't revealed "anything about—" Jimmy's secret, and we are left wondering. If the writer has, in fact, betrayed Jimmy in the course of the retelling, we cannot be sure what it is we were not meant to know and why Jimmy wants to suppress it. In either case, the men wordlessly understand each other, and the reader is an outsider. Like Jake Barnes hungering impotently after Lady Brett, Jimmy continues to suffer from Martha's unattainability. As in the previous story, we are allowed to glimpse the gap between the mask and the face, the wounded man behind the masculine pose. But Martha is barely more than a plot device signifying Jimmy's life of virility and innocence destroyed by the war.

Source: Lorrie N. Smith, "'The Things Men Do': The Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's *Esquire* Stories," in *Critique,* Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, Fall, 1994, pp. 17-40.

Adaptations

"The Things They Carried" was recorded in an abridged version with music added in 1991. It is narrated by Anthony Heald and is available from Harper Audio.

Topics for Further Study

Read a story describing the American soldier's experience in another war. How is the Vietnam War narrative different, if at all, in form and content?

Do some research on the phase of the Vietnam War that was called "Vietnamization" by American policy makers. How would these political and military decisions affect the mission and attitude of infantrymen like those in "The Things They Carried"?

What is the nature of relations between Vietnam and the United States today? How do the Vietnamese people feel about Americans, and what do Vietnam veterans think about Vietnam and its people? You may want to start by looking at Tim O'Brien's 1994 article in the *New York Times Magazine.*

Why did returning veterans from Vietnam have so much difficulty reintegrating into American society? How has the public's attitude changed since the end of the war and why? Consider such factors as increased awareness of post traumatic stress syndrome and the building of the memorial in Washington.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: All young men are required to register for the selective service and face being drafted into the armed forces to serve in Vietnam. While some young men of wealth and privilege escape the draft by enrolling in college, other objectors who are less fortunate flee to Canada to avoid service, or openly defy the draft and face criminal charges. Former heavy weight champion Muhammad Ali, then Cassius Clay, is among those conscientious objectors who choose jail over military service.

1990s: Though all young men are still required to register with the selective service when they turn eighteen, the United States armed forces have been strictly voluntary since Nixon ended the draft in 1972.

1960s: With the Cold War at its peak, America's foreign policy is aimed at stopping the spread of communism in every far-flung corner of the world. Military and political leaders use the domino theory to justify the enormous financial and human costs of involvement in Vietnam.

1990s: With the Cold War finally thawed and the break-up of the once formidable communist foe, the Soviet Union, American citizens and their leaders are more reluctant to become involved in foreign wars in developing nations.

1960s: Beyond the exotic sounding names they read about in newspapers or see on television, Americans know nothing of Vietnamese culture. Even major U.S. cities have few if any Vietnamese restaurants.

1990s: Due to the influx of the so-called "boat people" in the 1970s, and the constant stream of immigration since, Vietnamese culture has made a permanent impact on America.

What Do I Read Next?

Vietnam: A History (1983) by Stanley Karnow. This lengthy and exhaustive account is still the benchmark and is a surprisingly readable piece of scholarship.

Dispatches (1977) by Michael Herr is one of the centerpieces in the journalist and personal narrative genre of Vietnam writing. Unflinching and realistic, it was one of the first books of its kind.

A Rumor of War (1977) by Philip Caputo is often mentioned in the same breath with Herr's *Dispatches.* This dark narrative pays particular attention to the way individual soldiers functioned as groups in the war.

In Country (1985) by Bobbie Ann Mason is a novel about the effects of the Vietnam War on those who remain at home.

Shallow Graves: Two Women and Vietnam (1986) by Wendy Larsen Wilder and Tran Thi Nga is a collection or sequence of poems written by the wife of an American journalist and a former employee in the magazine's Saigon office. Using alternating sections the book offers a startling and moving picture of the war.

Robert Olen Butler's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992) addresses the Vietnam War and its aftermath from a variety of narrative perspectives.

Going After Cacciato (1978) is Tim O'Brien's award-winning novel about an infantryman who decides to walk from Vietnam to Paris for the peace talks.

Further Study

Herring, George. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975,* 2nd edition, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

This brief but comprehensive book is divided into clear sections that can be read separately and contains an extensive and invaluable bibliographic essay.

Lee, Don. A Profile of Tim O'Brien in *Ploughshares,* Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1995, p. 196.

A useful overview of O'Brien's career. Includes biographical information.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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