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O’Brien’s ***The Things They Carried***

**Study Guide 2014**

**Anticipation Guide**

Directions: Read each statement below and decide how you feel about it. Then circle Agree or Disagree depending on your feelings. You MAY NOT circle both or decide you stand in the middle. You must choose a side!

1. People should be willing to die for their country. Agree Disagree
2. You must have the courage to stand up for what Agree Disagree

you believe in spite of the consequences.

1. War is a necessary evil. Agree Disagree
2. Killing someone in war is not murder. Agree Disagree
3. The ends justify the means. Agree Disagree
4. You should always obey the rules. Agree Disagree

**Author Background**

**Tim O'Brien** was born October 1, 1946, in Minnesota. He graduated from college in 1968 and was accepted to Harvard for grad school; however, he was drafted into the Vietnam War two weeks after graduation. O’Brien was against the war in Vietnam; he had attended several peace vigils and war protests, but when he was drafted, he reported for service at Fort Lewis, Washington on August 14, 1968. He was shipped to Vietnam in February 1969, where he served as an infantry foot soldier until March of 1970. His main area of operations while he was in Vietnam was in the Quang Ngai Province, which later became the setting for *The Things They Carried.* O’Brien was eventually wounded and returned home with a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star for Valor, and a Combat Infantry Badge.

When he returned from the war, O’Brien went on to complete graduated school at Harvard and received an internship as a reporter at the Washington Post. His writing career was launched in 1973 with the release of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home* about his war experiences.

O’Brien has released several more book about his experiences in Vietnam such as *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) and the short story “Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?” (1975). O’Brien is now a professor at Texas State University where he teaches Creative Writing.

*“…you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance*

**Study Guide Questions**

**The Things They Carried:**

1. Identify Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and explain what he carries into war (equipment, personal items, emotional burden).
2. Who is Martha? What do you think she symbolizes to Lt. Cross?
3. Why does Cross blame himself for Lavender’s death? Explain why you do or do not think his guilt is justified.
4. Identify the men in Lt. Cross’ platoon and identify some of the tangible and some of the intangible things they carry into war. What is their primary motivation for fighting in the war?
5. Explain how the men in the platoon react to Lavender’s death. Why do you think they react as they do?
6. Explain what is being compared in the metaphor, “…they dreamed of freedom birds.” Why are these “birds” important to the men of Vietnam?
7. Prediction: How many of the men in Cross’ platoon will survive the war? Who do you think will survive?

**Love and Spin:**

1. Why do you think O’Brien switches from third person to first person?
2. Who comes to visit O’Brien at his home in Massachusetts? What does this visit reveal about the two men?
3. How does Jimmy Cross want to be remembered? Why do you think this is important to him?
4. Identify two examples of terror and violence in the story “Spin.” What do you think is the most poignant memory? Why?
5. Identify two examples of sweetness and gentleness in the story “Spin.” Which do you find the most touching? Why?
6. What do you think this phrase means: “Stories are for eternity.”

**On The Rainy River, Enemies** and **Friends**

1. Why hasn’t O’Brien ever told the story “On the Rainy River”? Why does he decide to do so now?
2. How does O’Brien feel when his draft notice arrives in 1968? What does O’Brien discover about himself?
3. Explain O’Brien’s reaction to the Vietnam War before and after his draft notice arrives.
4. Describe O’Brien’s summer job. Why do you think he gives such a graphic description of his work?
5. What options did those of draft age have during the Vietnam War? What is the only option that is feasible for O’Brien? Why?
6. What does O’Brien decide to do? Explain his emotional conflict over this decision. How does he react physically? Mentally?
7. Who is Elroy Berdahl? Why is he influential in O’Brien’s life?
8. What does O’Brien decide to do about fleeing to Canada? Explain his moral dilemma and why he makes this choice. Explain why you do or do not think he made the right decision.
9. Why do Lee Struck and Dave Jenson fight? What is the result? What do you think this conflict reveals about men in war?

**How To Tell A True War Story** and **The Dentist**

1. Identify three criteria O’Brien believes create a true war story.
2. Explain why you do or do not think the stories Kiley and Sanders tell fit these criteria.
3. How does Curt Lemon die? Why do you think O’Brien says this story “makes his stomach believe”?
4. What happens to the water buffalo after Lemon’s death? Why do you think the men react as they do?
5. Explain why you think O’Brien calls Vietnam the “Garden of Evil.”
6. Identify three contradictions O’Brien presents about war.
7. How does Curt Lemon react when he goes to the dentist? Why does he have the dentist pull a healthy tooth?

**Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong**

1. Identify Mary Anne Bell and Mark Fossie. Why does Mary Anne come to Vietnam? Explain why you do or do not think her arrival is believable.
2. Identify three ways in which Mary Anne changes after arriving in Vietnam.
3. What does Mark discover about Mary Anne’s nighttime disappearances?
4. What eventually happens to Mary Anne?
5. What do you think Mary Anne transformation symbolizes? Explain your answer.

**Stockings, The Man I Killed, Ambush,** and **Style**

1. Why do you think “Stockings” follows Mary Anne’s story?
2. What is Henry Dobbins’ good-luck charm? What does this symbolize to him?
3. How does Kiowa feel about establishing a fortress at the pagoda?
4. Explain why do you think the monks keep going through the motions of washing their hands.
5. What does O’Brien speculate about the man he kills? Why do you think he does so?
6. Why do you think O’Brien keeps referring to the man’s eye, now a star-shaped hole?
7. How does the Vietnamese man’s death affect O’Brien? What does Kiowa do to console him?
8. How does the Vietnamese girl react to the death of her family? Why do you think she does this? Identify different ways in which you think people cope with death.

**Speaking of Courage** and **Notes**

1. Identify three ways in which the Vietnam War has affected Norman Bowker.
2. What does Bowker remember about Kiowa’s death? Why do you think these flashbacks keep occurring?
3. Identify the medals Bowker received for his service in Vietnam.
4. Identify the one medal Bowker did not receive and explain why this troubles him so much. Why doesn’t he talk to his father about this?
5. In his letter to O’Brien, what does Bowker suggest about his writing? What effect does this have on O’Brien?
6. What eventually happens to Bowker? What do you think causes this?

**In the Field, Good Form,** and **Field Trip**

1. Why does Jimmy Cross blame himself for Kiowa’s death?
2. When the men find Kiowa’s rucksack, what is in it? What do you think this indicates about Kiowa?
3. Explain who you think the young soldier is and why? What does he blame himself for Kiowa’s death?
4. To what does O’Brien compare the field where Kiowa is buried, Kiowa, and the members of the platoon? What is your interpretation of these metaphors?
5. Identify two events O’Brien states are “story” truth and two events that are “happening” truth.
6. Who returns to Vietnam with O’Brien and what is the primary thing that happens there?
7. Why do you think O’Brien returns? Explain whether you think this is a “story” truth or a “happening” truth.

**Ghost Soldiers**

1. How many times is O’Brien injured? Who was the medic who attended him each time?
2. Why does O’Brien want revenge from Bobby Jorgenson? Explain why you do or do not think he is justified in feeling this way.
3. Why does O’Brien think he is transferred away from the war zone? How does he feel about this?
4. When the men from Alpha Company return to base, how do they react to O’Brien? How does O’Brien feel about this?
5. What happens when O’Brien meets Jorgenson at base camp? What does O’Brien decide to do? Why?
6. Who is going to help O’Brien with his plans for revenge? What do they intend to do? Explain briefly what happens to O’Brien; to Azar; to Jorgenson.
7. Identify the metaphor that identifies the main “ghost” in Vietnam. How does this ghost cause problems for Americans?
8. How has the war changed O’Brien? Explain why you do or do not think this change is typical of other soldiers.

**Nightlife** and **Lives of the Dead**

1. What does Rat Kiley do to escape active duty in Vietnam? Why does he do so? What do you think his experience signifies about men in battle?
2. How do the Americans react to the death of the old Vietnamese man? Why do you think they do this?
3. Who is Linda? What happens to her?
4. Why do you think O’Brien includes the story about Linda in this book?
5. What does O’Brien view as the role of stories in remembering those who have died?
6. Explain what you think O’Brien means by his final statement, “I realize it is Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story.” Who is Tim? Who is Timmy?

**The Things YOU Carry Essay**

We have spent a great deal of time talking about the novel *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien and what soldiers in the Vietnam War carried. Now it is your turn to share with me what things you carry in your life. In your essay you can mention both tangible and intangible things—But really focus on the intangible. Remember the soldiers carried both guns and fear. Think about all the concrete, tangible things you have in your life, but **more importantly** also about the **more abstract, intangible or symbolic** things you carry. If you need to, refer back Chapter 1 *The Things They Carried* as you are writing to get some style ideas.

A few ways to get started:

 Think about the different roles you play in your life

* Student
* Brother/Sister and/or Older/Younger
* Teen
* Sports player
* Male/Female
* Role Model
* Class Clown

As yourself some questions

* Why am I carrying this?
* Did I make the choice or is someone making me carry it?
* Do I wish I could put it down?
* What does it weigh?
* What does it demand of me to carry it?
* Where would I be without it?

Some ideas to get you started: An object you love. A memory (positive or negative). Loneliness. Keys. Pictures. Medicines. Responsibility. Bitterness. Expectations (your own or of you). Fears. Secrets. Passions. Commitments. Political views.

Here are some quotes from the text to get you thinking about what to write:

* *“The things they carried were largely determined by necessity” (2).*
* *“What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty” (5).*
* *“They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the power of the things they carried” (7).*
* *“What they carried varied by mission” (9).*
* *“The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition” (13).*
* *“For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity” (19).*
* *“They carried the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing – these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (21).*

Your final paper should be 2 – 3 pages. Time New Roman. Size 12. Double spaced. You know – the usual. ☺

It must be submitted to turnitin.com.

The final draft will be worth 100 points and is due \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ at the beginning of the hour.

In the spaces on the next page, write AT LEAST 10 things you carry with you, both tangible and intangible that you can build a paper around. It would probably be helpful to write a short description of why you could include it in your paper. You do not/should not use all 20 things in your paper; narrow the final elements down to some of the most important things you carry and explain those (usually 1-3 items). Remember—we want you to focus on the **abstract, intangible** things.

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| --- | --- |
| **Tangible**(you can touch) | **Intangible**(you can’t “touch”) |
| 1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8.9.10. | 1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8.9.10. |