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ENGL 336

Professor Rhodes

The Historical Implications of War: An Analysis of The Things They Carried

O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is less a comment on the conflicting cultures of war and peace, and more on the effects of war on male civilian soldiers.

While it would be easy to argue the story in its simplest terms, as primarily the recounting story of soldiers who enlisted during the Vietnam war, it's important to be aware that historically there were two lotteries used to draft soldiers into this war, leading to everyday men were forced into government military service. In the opening of O'Brien's story, we are initially introduced to First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's tale. The story focuses on the death of his soldier, Ted Lavender and Cross's love interest back home. The story is told somewhat in reverse from Lavender's death as we learn about the types of "things" the soldiers carry – from their physical belongings to the emotions weighing all of them down. For Cross, it's the letters and pebble from Martha – the caring beauty back home. The stories nonlinear presentation is a technique that helps O'Brien orient the reader to important details about the men and the "things they carried."

In this brief story, the reader's expectations regarding the horrors of the Vietnam War, twisted and mocked. Instead of pristine, hardened soldiers, ready for anything that

comes their way, we are shown that they are everyday people unsure and unprepared for the violent experiences of war. O'Brien weaves cultural and historical elements into the story to make the setting and timeline feel more realistic. The overall message of the story mirrors much of the sentiment that came following the Vietnam War – as an unnecessary conflict that did more harm than good to all countries involved. It's the narrative style and structure itself that gets this message across to the readers. Had O'Brien simply "told" the readers the effects of the war on the men, how specifically they were feeling (sad, scared, angry), or the meaning behind the items they carried, rather than his method of "showing," as readers, we would have likely been less convinced of the message. By experiencing the internalized thoughts and feelings and interpreting things through our own lenses, we're more likely to trust in and relate to the story's message.

We see this right in the beginning of the story through Jimmy Cross. We are not immediately given a definitive that we are in a war, instead, subtle cultural cues are given: *Lieutenant* Cross, rucksack, foxhole, canteen. By using culturally recognizable military terms, we are shown where we are in terms of a historical setting. What's most interesting at this point is the lack of a war overtone. Instead, Jimmy Cross is introduced to us as a man in love. A young man fond of an ideal beauty back home, whom he hopes is a virgin and somehow in love with him. This is far more telling of the type of character Cross is than anything else at this point in the story. Cross isn't introduced as an experienced leader of war, he's just a small-town boy longing for mutual love.

It's just after this introduction of Martha's letters that we get the first of many lists in the story. This initial list is introduced to us as, "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity" (O'Brien 665). Necessity is typically defined as something essential, indispensable, a must-have. In a war setting, things like the rations or canteens of water would logically fit this definition. But how does a reader interpret something like Martha's letters, the packets of Kool-Aid, premium dope, or candy? Are these items necessities of war, key for a soldier's livelihood? O'Brien gives a very brief detail about each man with the items. Jensen, "who practiced field hygiene," carries dental items and soap, Dobbins, a larger soldier, "carried extra rations" (O'Brien 665). These items humanize the characters in the readers mind. We all have items that mean something deep and important to us alone. Whether it's a childhood toy, a comfortable food item, or a memento from a loved one. The items in this story often have far more emotional value and context than they do legitimate usefulness in a humid, foreign jungle war. The items also reinforce the setting and time of the book's plot. The items carried during the 1950's till the 1970's likely look much different than items modern day soldiers – men who voluntarily enlist – would carry. Although we could argue similarities would exist, that is beyond the scope of this essay.

These items help illustrate O'Brien's intended message: that everyday men were forced into terrible scenarios with little to no preparation as a result suffered. Given the well-known fate of by many men who returned from wars in the earlier half of the twentieth century, (before much was understood about the psychological effects of war), the items carried illustrate many of the side effects of war in the story. Lavender carries tranquilizers

out of fear. He was emotionally not reading to handle the violence of war. And we are left to wonder if he caused his own death as a result. Did perhaps the partaking of drugs to numb one's responses make him unable to realize the danger so close at hand (O'Brien 665, 667).

O'Brien makes heavy use of symbols and images to communicate the effects of war on the civilian soldiers. Looking again at one item in particular, the candies, we can derive a heavy meaning from something that would otherwise be insignificant to the everyday reader. "Rat Kiley carried a canvas satchel filled with, ... all the things a medic must carry, *including M&M's for especially bad wounds*" (O'Brien 667). While I cannot speak for the thoughts of every reader, it would likely be safe to argue that M&M's are not the first thing that comes to mind when treating an "especially bad wound." The little chocolate candy is more vital in its healing ability than the previously mentioned morphine earlier in the same passage. Compare this to the line, "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (O'Brien 668). This line follows a long list of deadly weapons from bayonets, to AK-47s. Again, it is shown to us that the items have more meaning than their intended purpose. These items carried do have the ability to help the men survive and fight back against the enemy – an enemy that is rarely named and often remains an unknown to us. But with that power comes a higher cost – an emotional and moral one. This passage orients us back to O'Brien's commentary on the war. The Vietnam War was an unpopular one, particularly during the 1960s, a decade noted for its political and civil upheaval. This moral message is more clearly state during a

later passage. This exchange of dialogue occurs just after they've killed a teenage Vietcong "soldier", the only enemy we encounter physically:

"You want my opinion, Mitchell Sanders said, there's a definite moral here.

He put his hand on the dead boy's wrist. He was quiet for a time, as if counting a pulse, then he patted the stomach, almost affectionately, and used Kiowa's hunting hatchet to remove the thumb.

Henry Dobbins asked what the moral was.

Moral?

You know. *Moral*.

Sanders wrapped the thumb in toilet paper and handed it across to Norman Bowker. There was no blood. Smiling, he kicked the boy's head, watched the flies scatter, and said, It's like with that old TV show—Paladin. Have gun, will travel.

Henry Dobbins thought about it.

Yeah, well, he finally said. I don't see no moral.

There it *is*, man.

Fuck off." (O'Brien 671)

I've specifically kept the block quote in its original format, because it is one of the few moments O'Brien incorporates dialogue in the story, second in length to only one other. The way in which the conversation flows, gives the reader time to come to terms

with the same shocking revelation about a war's moral as Dobbins – that there is no logical moral. It's simply an unjust and violent war. It has no insightful purpose in this case. They are here to fight and kill. There is no real rhyme or reason in killing a teenage boy, a child likely just a few years younger than the men identified to us in the story. The United States has conscripted men, everyday people with no prior experience of death in this form most likely, to sprawl among the foreign land without real intent or purpose. In this chilling passage, two men debate morals while cutting off a young boy's thumb. The casual violence implants a real discomfort in the reader. Just like the death of Lavender. He's killed while taking a leak. Exposed and undignified. War is dehumanizing in this story and warps the minds and bodies of men who at the end of the day, are not soldiers but men longing for the love and familiarity of home.

I originally proposed that O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is less a comment on the conflicting cultures of war and peace, and more on the effects of war on male civilian soldiers. But in truth, it's the collective grouping of these things. The effects of war on the civilian soldiers in turn becomes a commentary on the conflicting states of peace and war. O'Brien, however, chooses to zoom his readers into the "things" carried and their effects on the men over the course of the story before he makes his point at the end with Cross's self-realization of the events preceding said ending: "He understood. It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried *inside*. The things men did or felt they had to do" (O'Brien 677). It's O'Brien's final attempt to tell and show the reader the true meaning behind the items carried, the lasting issue of war, and the real human and emotional cost that follows. And he carries that message through well.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. "The Things They Carried." *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, edited by Ann Charters, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 2015, pp. 664–677.