



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50204-256-9

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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

sales@novelunits.com

novelunits.com

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension:

Predicting, cause/effect,
inference

Literary Elements

Characterization, symbolism,
sarcasm, irony, simile,
metaphor, theme, acronym

Writing

Poetry, newspaper article,
eulogy, epitaph, lament,
letter

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Thinking

Research, compare/contrast,
analysis, brainstorming,
critical thinking

Across the Curriculum:

Art—collage, montage;
Music—ballad; Current
Events—magazine/
newspaper articles and
pictures

Genre: fiction with some factual details

Setting: Vietnam; United States

Point of View: Primarily first person; three chapters are in third-person omniscient

Themes: anxiety; psychological stress; shame/embarrassment; fear; survival; guilt; blame; loneliness; isolation; violence; truth; memory

Conflict: United States vs. Viet Cong; person vs. self; person vs. Government; person vs. person

Style: narrative

Tone: forthright

Summary

Through a series of linked stories, Tim O'Brien provides glimpses of the Vietnam War and those who fought in it. Although the character Tim O'Brien is the narrator, the book is fiction rather than autobiographical, and O'Brien acknowledges that most of the events he records never really happened.

The "things they carry" into the Vietnam War include both tangible and intangible burdens. In addition to the physical necessities for survival, e.g., equipment, weapons, and supplies, they carry cherished mementos, memories, and fears. While in Vietnam, they acquire additional burdens such as guilt, helplessness, anger, and grief. O'Brien reveals the emotional and mental pain the men experience in Vietnam and the nightmarish images they bring home with them.

Honors: National Magazine Award (1987); *New York Times*: named one of ten best books (1990); *Chicago Tribune*: Heartland Award; finalist for Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award; French edition: France's Prix de Meilleur Livre Etranger (1993); selected for inclusion in *Best Short Stories of the Century*, edited by John Updike.

Characters

Members of Alpha Company

Tim O'Brien: the narrator who, in dealing with his own memories, conveys the horrors of the Vietnam War

Jimmy Cross: twenty-four years old; first lieutenant and platoon leader; carries responsibility for his men and blames himself for each death

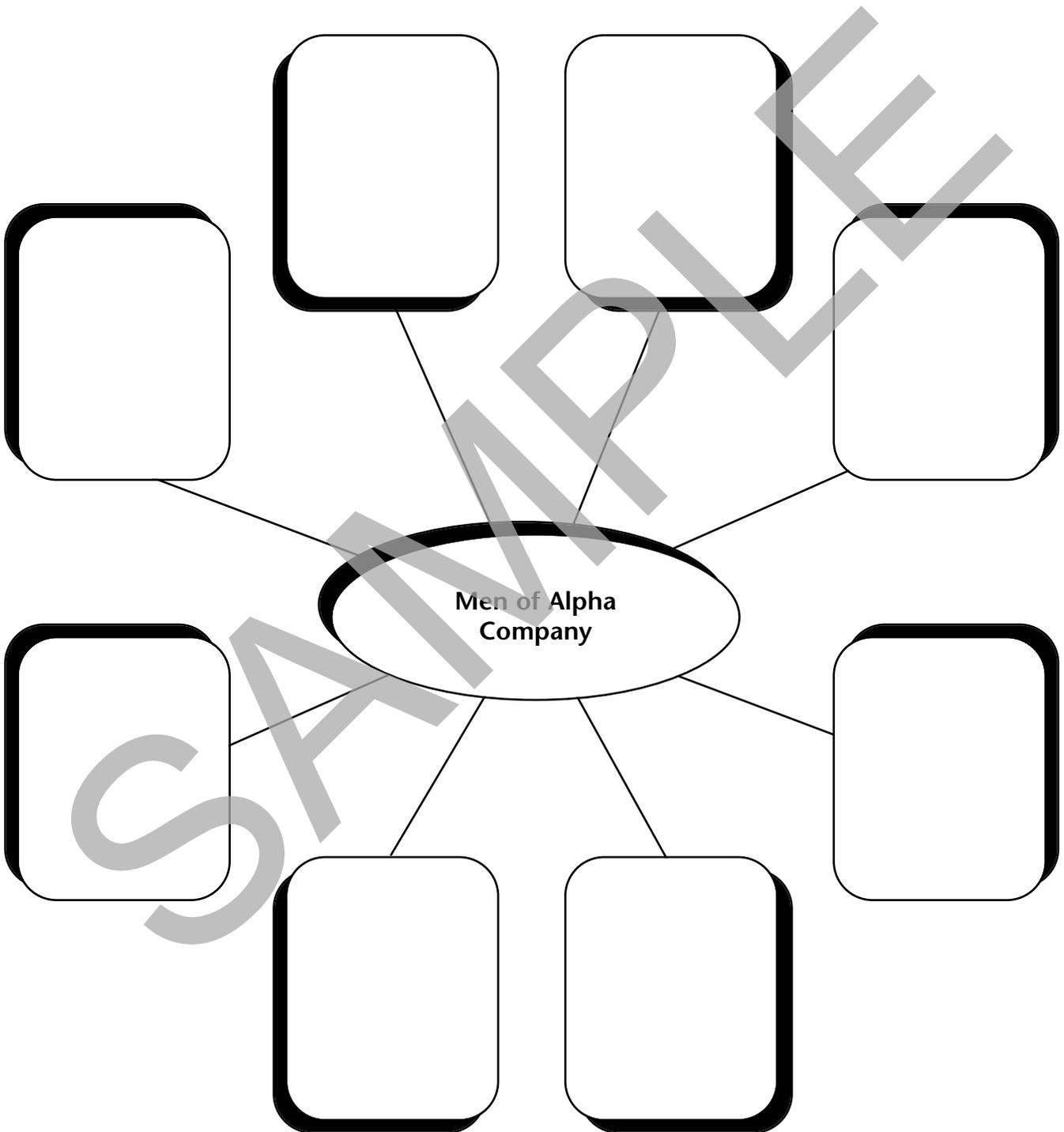
Ted Lavender: takes tranquilizers to mask his terror; first man to die; memories of his death continue to haunt the others

Mitchell Sanders: kind; devoted to other soldiers; impartial; wants everyone to be treated fairly

Norman Bowker: quiet, introspective; carries emotional scars home with him that culminate in suicide

Character Analysis

Directions: Identify and describe the eight men of Alpha Company in the surrounding rectangles, all of the main characters except Tim O'Brien.



Supplementary Activities

1. Have students (a) write a letter from Jimmy Cross to Martha after he burns her letters and pictures or (b) write a five-senses poem, "Guilt," reflecting Jimmy Cross' reaction to Lavender's death.
2. Have students begin a list of literary devices in the novel. Examples: **Metaphor**—Imagination: a killer (p. 11); resupply choppers: great American war chest (p. 16) **Similes**— They moved like moles (p. 15); They (soldiers) carried (their burdens) like freight trains (p. 16); This (memory of Lavender's death) was something he (Cross) would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war (p. 16).

Pages 27–38

Several years after the war, O'Brien and Cross reminisce about the things they still carry. O'Brien relates stories from the war.

Vocabulary

antipersonnel (36) lethal (37)

Acronyms

AWOL (35)

Military/Slang

poppa-san (33) dink (33) body bag (37)

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the switch from third person to first person. Elicit student response concerning why the author uses this technique. *(Responses will vary. Ideas: O'Brien veers from the more objective third-person omniscient to a personal first-person approach. This emphasizes the lapse of time and the retrospective memories of Vietnam. Although he is now 43 years old, the memories he and Jimmy Cross share are as vivid as the day they happened. pp. 27–28)*
2. Examine the memories O'Brien and Cross share and what these reveal about the two men. *(Through old pictures and stories, their buddies who died in Vietnam will remain forever young. They are able to laugh about some of the craziness of men in war. Cross reveals that he has never forgiven himself for Lavender's death. After showing O'Brien a picture of Martha, Cross tells of their reunion. O'Brien learns that Martha has become a Lutheran missionary. Cross vows his continuing love for Martha, but acknowledges that she never had any romantic interest in him. His final request reveals his desire to be remembered as the best platoon leader ever and alludes to his guilt over Lavender's death. Memories of the Vietnam War remain vivid for both men. pp. 27–30)*
3. Analyze the contradictions of war O'Brien reveals in "Spin": terror and violence vs. sweetness, gentleness, humor, and monotony. Elicit responses as to what they consider the most poignant memory. *(Terror/violence: Kiowa sinking into a field of human waste and mud; Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree; the death of a young Vietnamese soldier; tense boredom, waiting for gunfire; the smell of an empty body bag; Azar strapping Lavender's puppy to a mine. Sweetness and gentleness: Bowker and Dobbins playing checkers; Azar giving candy to a maimed*

Vietnamese child; the old Vietnamese man guiding the platoon through the minefields; Bowker's wishing for a letter from his father telling him it's okay if he doesn't win any medals; Kiowa teaching a rain dance to Kiley and Jensen; Lavender adopting an orphan puppy. Humor: Lavender's reaction to tranquilizers; Dobbins' singing as he sews on his stripes; Sanders' tales. Monotony: digging foxholes, slapping mosquitoes; Answers will vary. pp. 31–37)

4. O'Brien remembers the checker game having "something restful about it." How does the game contrast to the Vietnam War? (*The playing field was a strict grid; you knew the score; the enemy was visible; there was a winner and a loser. p. 32*)

Supplementary Activities

1. Have students write a metaphor or simile poem based on O'Brien's explanation of stories. (Remembering and retelling a story takes it from the past and places it in the present. Stories join the past to the future. "Stories are for eternity." p. 38)
2. Have students add two similes and one metaphor to their list of literary devices. Examples: **Metaphor**—memories: traffic (p. 34) **Similes**—war was like a Ping-Pong ball (p. 32); you could end up like popcorn (p. 33); feel boredom dripping inside you like a leaky faucet (p. 34); things often took on a curiously playful atmosphere like a sporting event (p. 37)

Pages 39–66

O'Brien is drafted into the Vietnam War. He attempts to defect to Canada but changes his mind after an encounter with Elroy Berdahl. In Vietnam, tensions build between members of the platoon.

Vocabulary

amortizing (40)	liberal (42)	hawk (42)	eviscerated (42)
deferments (43)	pacifist (44)	schizophrenia (44)	acquiescence (45)
platitudes (45)	cryptic (49)	reticence (51)	impassive (60)

Acronyms

SEATO (40)	CO (44)	FBI (50)	LZ (62)
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Military/Slang

dustoff (66)

Discussion Questions

1. Examine why O'Brien has never told the story "On the Rainy River" and why he now decides to do so. (*Responses will vary; Ideas: he has always thought the story would cause embarrassment. The memory still bothers him, and he decides to tell the story, hoping to relieve the pressure of his dreams. When O'Brien's draft notice arrives in 1968, he discovers that he is a coward rather than the hero he had assumed he would be. His narrative reveals his inward conflict and its ultimate resolution. This is an example of one type of literary catharsis, i.e., writing to relieve and correct an unhealthy emotional state produced by conflicting feelings. pp. 39–61*)
2. Examine O'Brien's reaction to the Vietnam War in 1968 and his response to the draft notice. (*He hates the war and cannot understand the rationale for fighting. He believes you do not make war without knowing why. He participates in mild protests, e.g., ringing doorbells for McCarthy*)