

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Things They Carried**

by Tim O'Brien

written by Eva Richardson

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# The Things They Carried

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

- outline the influence of the Vietnam War on the characters and events in the novel.
- describe and analyze the interplay between truth and fiction within the context of the novel.
- explore narrative techniques, particularly the effects of shifting points of view throughout the novel.
- discuss the text as a coherent novel or as a collection of loosely connected short stories and recollections about the war.
- analyze the novel as social commentary on American involvement in the Vietnam War.
- study the relationship between writing and reality as modeled by Tim O'Brien.
- evaluate and analyze the novel as an example of the “war literature” genre.
- analyze the novel as an instructional manual for how to write well.
- trace the connection between names and identity in the novel.
- consider the interplay between death/loss and love/intimacy/romance within the context of the novel.
- analyze the complex and ambiguous meanings of “to carry.”
- study the powerful emotions of guilt and shame for the characters in the novel.
- respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
- respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
- offer a close reading of *The Things They Carried* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

## **Background Information**

### **THE WAR IN VIETNAM:**

The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, developed as a result of European Colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. In 1954, French Colonial rule in Vietnam, which had lasted for roughly one century, ended after years of conflict between the native Vietnamese and the French Colonial occupiers. France was forced to withdraw from Vietnam, and the country was divided into two separate sections during the Geneva Peace Accords of 1954.

The partition of the country was largely influenced by the Cold War that shaped the post-WWII world: North Vietnam was henceforth controlled by Vietnamese Communists who established a strict Communist state, while the southern part of Vietnam became a non-Communist state with the help of the American administration under President Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower and other western supporters feared the spread of Communism and supported the Southern state in order to prevent the Communist north from gaining excessive power. Over the next decade, North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front threatened the stability of the U.S.-supported southern Vietnamese state. When the United States feared that Communists were gaining ground and jeopardizing the safety of the Southern Vietnamese government, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent the first U.S. combat troops to Vietnam in 1965.

The United States fought in Vietnam until 1975, when the country was reunited under Communist rule. Overall, the Vietnam War was fought in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and ultimately resulted in immense casualties for the Vietnamese as well as the Americans. From the onset, America's involvement in the Vietnam War has been heavily criticized both internationally and domestically. Anti-war sentiments grew especially when American involvement in the war proved to lay a heavy burden on the American military, economy, and morale.

### **ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT:**

The War in Vietnam sparked one of the most significant and influential anti-war movements in U.S. history. The anti-war movement arose directly out of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. In fact, Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of the first outspoken critics of American involvement in the war. He believed that the war in Vietnam demanded too many casualties and put a severe strain on the American economy. Moreover, Americans voiced a growing concern about the moral justifications offered by the U.S. administration for supporting the South Vietnamese government and entering the war. In fact, it became increasingly clear that the South Vietnamese government supported by the United States was not only opposed by the Communist Northern Vietnam state but by countless South Vietnamese citizens as well. The anti-war movement quickly spread, particularly on college campuses and in intellectual circles. Demonstrators began taking to the streets and voicing their dissent with U.S.

### **DISCUSSION TOPICS/QUESTIONS**

1. What is the significance of “truth” within the context of the novel?
2. Why can't the novel be considered a memoir of author Tim O'Brien's war experiences as a soldier in Vietnam?
3. What effect do changes in narrative perspective have on the reader? How do O'Brien's changes in point of view reinforce the themes of his novel?
4. To what extent is the novel a war novel? An anti-war novel?
5. What function(s) does the character Kiowa fulfill within the novel? As a character, a soldier, a religious man? Why does O'Brien return to Vietnam with Kiowa's moccasins?
6. What significance do the various things soldiers carry hold within the context of the novel for the different characters?
7. What is O'Brien's perception of how people “at home” react to and relate to the soldiers' experiences in Vietnam?
8. What motivates Tim O'Brien to go to war? What motivates other soldiers?
9. What motivates author Tim O'Brien to write his novel?
10. What function do female characters fulfill within the novel? Martha? Mary Anne? Linda? Others?
11. What role does language play with regard to the interaction between soldiers in Vietnam?

# The Things They Carried

## “The Things They Carried”

1. How does the ambiguous nature of the term “carry” introduce the soldiers and the themes of the novel?

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2. What does the fact that Lt. Jimmy Cross carries a picture of Martha reveal about his character?

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3. What does the phrase “they searched the villages without knowing what to look for” reveal about the soldiers’ attitudes toward the war?

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4. How does Kiowa react to Lavender’s death?

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5. How does the phrase, “men killed, and died, because they were too embarrassed not to” explicate the theme of shame and guilt?

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### “Enemies”

1. Why does Jensen claim that there are “enemies everywhere”?

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2. How does Dave Jensen’s reaction exemplify the fragile psychology of Vietnam soldiers?

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### “Friends”

1. Why has O’Brien placed this chapter immediately after the previous chapter “Enemies”? What is the connection between the chapters?

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2. What does the arrangement between Strunk and Jensen reveal about the soldiers in the platoon? What does the fact that Strunk begs Jensen not to fulfill his part of the agreement reveal about Jensen? About soldiers in general?

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3. Why do Strunk and Jensen enter into their pact in the first place? Why does Strunk want to rescind the pact when he is injured?

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4. Why is Jensen “relieved” to hear that Strunk has died?

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**“Stockings”**

1. Thematically, why does O’Brien place this chapter immediately after the previous one?

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2. How does the notion of superstition mirror what O’Brien has been proposing as his notion of truth?

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**“Church”**

1. Why does Kiowa come to believe that it is wrong to set up camp in the church?

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### “Style”

1. What kind of literary device does the narrator use several times throughout this short chapter to describe the scene in the village where the young girl is dancing? What effect is created with this device?

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### “Speaking of Courage”

1. What point of view is used to convey the events in “Speaking of Courage”?

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2. What are the levels of “courage” to which the title of this vignette refers?

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3. How does Norman Bowker experience his hometown after returning to it after the end of the War?

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4. How is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July display described in the chapter an instance of irony?

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**“Notes”**

1. How does this chapter build on the previous chapter’s theme of isolation and alienation?

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2. How does the chapter contribute to the theme of guilt?

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**“In the Field”**

1. Who is the predominant narrator in this chapter?

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2. What is Azar’s coping mechanism for dealing with death?

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3. What is the significance of the metaphor O’Brien uses to describe Jimmy Cross’s reaction to seeing his soldiers search for Kiowa’s body?

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4. How does the chapter develop the themes of guilt and blame?

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5. What other theme does O’Brien revisit in narrating Cross’s feelings on the morning after Kiowa’s death?

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