

Using
*Bloom's Taxonomy to
Explore Literature*

Levels of Understanding



The Things They Carried

By *Tim O'Brien*

written by *Rita Truschel*



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Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

Levels of Understanding breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

The five types of questions, again, representative of Bloom's domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response**—will ask the students to “respond” to the text by relating it to personal experience or by presenting an opinion on a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely identify or define a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title being studied in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment on the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may list Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with the title-specific questions to allow you to effectively bring Bloom into your classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's “higher order thinking skills,” *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead, helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate a personal view—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. 🍀



How to Use this Unit

EACH LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING: USING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY TO EXPLORE LITERATURE unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet your needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

While the Teacher's Guide contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially synthesis and evaluation) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and not as assessment activities.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. 🍀



Introduction to *The Things They Carried*

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED is a work of fiction set during the Vietnam War portraying combat events as well as events in the American soldiers' hometowns before and after their military service. Its foundation in a few essential facts of author Tim O'Brien's own experiences creates the impression of memoir, but O'Brien's narration blurs distinctions between what is literal fact, what is essentially factual, and what is purely fiction.

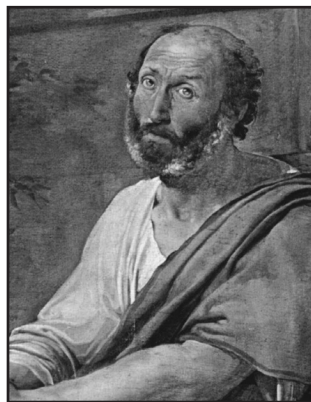
Much of O'Brien's stated purpose is to reflect on the elusive nature of truth.

Structurally, the book is a collection of loosely-related vignettes that do not build into a conventional plot with rising action, climax, and *denouement*. Still the stories are intended to be read together as a cohesive work with a cumulative impact, not unlike a novel. 🍷

A brief overview of literary, history, theory, and criticism

Aristotle

THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHER can be considered the world's first literary critic and theorist. Examining



Aristotle

the works of Homer and the writers of great tragedy, Aristotle noted that the most successful works' language and form did more than merely imitate men and events. They conveyed emotion and actually evoked an emotional response in the audience.

The most successful stories, Aristotle theorized, were unified according to what he called "The Three Unities":

- **Unity of Action:** The plots of the most powerful stories have clear beginnings, middles, and ends that flow smoothly in a chain of believable causes and effects.
- **Unity of Time:** Aristotle noted that the events of the most successful stories unfold in an uninterrupted chronological sequence.
- **Unity of Place:** The stories are all set in a single location.

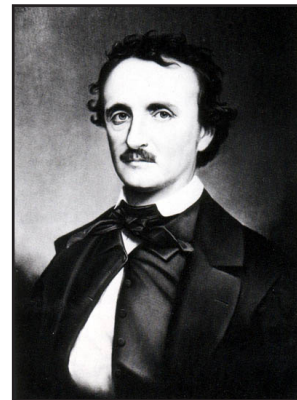
While Aristotle is no longer *the* authority on literary style and structure, his theories informed Western literature for centuries, and variations of his *unities* can still be found in contemporary fiction.

Edgar Allan Poe

The American poet and short story writer was also a critic and theorist. He asserted that an author must first decide what impression or emotional effect the story

was to create. Then every narrative element, every word, every sentence structure, every paragraph break should be crafted and arranged so as to cause readers to respond in the desired way.

Poe's theories gave rise to a variety of storytelling techniques and played a key role in the Modernist movement of the late nineteenth century and the post-modernist movement of the twentieth century.



Edgar Allan Poe

Modernism and Post-modernism

Modernism appeared after World War I as a movement intent on breaking with the traditional forms and conventions of the nineteenth century. It reflected a broader shift in social attitudes and philosophies in which the naïve optimism of the pre-World-War I *belle époque* gave way to a nearly incalculable disillusionment following the horrors of World War I.

As values, beliefs, and practices changed, so too did aesthetics. Traditional literature was outward-looking, recording and commenting on society, history, or an objective reality that no one fully comprehended even while everyone accepted its existence. Modernists began to reject this unknowable objective reality, exploring instead each individual imagination whose overall frame of reference was completely within itself.

This shift can be compared to the Existentialist shift from seeking the meaning of one's life to creating meaning for one's life.

Society's break with traditional values was reflected in a break with convention as well.

Levels of Understanding:

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains
to explore Tom O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

Writing Prompts

“The Things They Carried”: *analysis, evaluation*

Write a thoughtful, well-organized essay in which you examine the narrative techniques and devices used by author Tim O'Brien to introduce the premise and characters of this book. Include in your analysis a consideration of how these techniques contribute to the effectiveness of this story as an opening chapter.

“On the Rainy River”: *analysis, evaluation*

First-person narrator Tim O'Brien observes that Elroy Birdahl was the hero of his life. He also confesses, “I was a coward. I went to war.” Write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you examine the impact these apparent paradoxes have on the reader's understanding of O'Brien's conflict.

Chapter 7: “How to Tell a True War Story”: *analysis, synthesis*

Write a well-supported essay in which you examine O'Brien's use of the double meaning of the word “tell” in the title and story of this chapter. Consider especially what the use of the word's double meaning contributes to the overall structure and meaning of the book.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”: *analysis, synthesis*

The “story-within-a-story” is an ancient but still common narrative device. Usually the inner story is presented to provide additional insight or an alternative view of the characters, events, and issues in the frame story. Consider the story of Mary Anne Bell in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and write a thoughtful and well-reasoned essay in which you explore author Tim O'Brien's use of the story-within-a-story device and its function in the book.

“Stockings,” “Church”: *analysis*

Write a well-supported essay in which you explore the various levels of faith portrayed in *The Things They Carried*, especially in these chapters and their contribution to the overall meaning of the work.

“The Man I Killed,” “Ambush”: *analysis, synthesis*

These two stories, especially “The Man I Killed,” offer the reader arguably the most intimate glimpse into the narrator's mind and heart. Examine the two stories and then

write a well-organized and -supported essay in which you analyze the complex person these stories reveal the narrator to be and the techniques used by the author to reveal this character.

“Style”: *analysis, synthesis*

Discuss the thematic implications of this story. Do not merely summarize the action.

“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field”: *analysis, synthesis*

In “Notes,” O'Brien asserts,

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others.

Consider the three versions of Kiowa's death told in these stories and then write a thoughtful and well-organized essay in which you examine the chief differences in the three accounts and then propose and support a credible reason for O'Brien's telling this story in this way.

“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field”: *analysis, synthesis*

These three stories focus on the same central event—Kiowa's death—each providing a different perspective. Write a well-reasoned and well-supported essay in which you argue whether the varying accounts of the central event provide a comprehensive or fragmented understanding of the truth of the story? Do not merely summarize the accounts or attempt to create a single, comprehensive account.

“Good Form”: *synthesis, evaluation*

Write a reasonable and well-supported essay in which you explore O'Brien's characterization of truth and argue whether writers have an obligation to maintain clear boundaries between truth and fiction.

“Field Trip”: *analysis, synthesis*

Write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you support or refute the thesis that Tim O'Brien, the narrator and protagonist of *The Things They Carried*, is the soldier who let go of Kiowa and allowed him to sink into the muck that night on the bank of the Song Tra Bong.



Levels of Understanding:
Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains
to explore Tim O'Brien's

The Things They Carried

CHAPTER 1: THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

Comprehension

1. Besides military equipment, what additional objects does each of the men choose to carry? Why are these particular things chosen?

2. Why was Lt. Cross embarrassed by the violent ending of the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*?

3. What is the purpose of the pebble Martha mails to Jimmy?

4. What is the platoon's mission? What strategy do they employ to achieve this mission?

Reader Response

1. What is your impression of Martha? Why?

The Things They Carried

CHAPTERS 5 – 6: ENEMIES, FRIENDS

Comprehension

1. To what does the narrator attribute Jensen's paranoia after the fight with Strunk?

Reader Response

1. Is Jensen right in assuring Strunk that he will not carry out their agreement and kill Strunk? Why or why not?

2. Are Jensen and Strunk really enemies in "Enemies"? Are they really friends in "Friends"? Why or why not?

Analysis

1. What effect is achieved by the narrator's largely removing himself from the stories told in "Enemies" and "Friends"?

2. Are "Enemies" and "Friends" more effective as separate stories, or should they be combined into a single story?

The Things They Carried

CHAPTERS 10 – 11: STOCKINGS, CHURCH

Comprehension

1. What do these two chapters reveal about the character of Henry Dobbins?

2. What does the narrator mean when he says of Dobbins, “In many ways, he was like America itself, big and strong, full of good intentions,” and “Like his country, too, Dobbins was drawn toward sentimentality”?

3. What is the source of Kiowa’s discomfort when they first come upon the pagoda and then when they set up camp there temporarily?

4. How do the monks react to the Americans’ setting up camp at the pagoda?

Reader Response

1. What does the author imply in the first sentence by characterizing Henry Dobbins as a “superb soldier”?

2. Is O’Brien’s characterization of the United States as “big and strong, full of good intentions, a roll of fat jiggling at his belly, slow of foot but always plodding along, always there when you needed him, a believer in the virtues of simplicity and directness and hard labor ... drawn toward sentimentality” fair? Consider the United States of 1968 when the book is set, of 1988 when the book is being written, and of the period in which you are reading the book.

The Things They Carried

CHAPTER 15: SPEAKING OF COURAGE

Comprehension

1. On what day does this story take place?

2. What do we already know about Norman Bowker?

3. Why does not receiving the Silver Star haunt him? Why does it seem so important to him that he “almost” earned it?

4. Is the conversation between Bowker and his father real or imagined? How do you know?

5. How does Bowker answer Sally’s repeated request to stop using the word “shit” in telling his story?

6. What choice does Norman Bowker make when he lets go of Kiowa’s boot? Why is this decision a lingering conflict for him?

The Things They Carried

CHAPTER 20: THE GHOST SOLDIERS

Comprehension

1. In what ways does the narrator's relationship with the platoon change? How does this change affect his hatred of Bobby Jorgenson?

2. What does the narrator assert bothered him most about this entire episode?

Reader Response

1. In the conflict between the narrator and Bobby Jorgenson, who is the more sympathetic character? Why?

2. Does this story alter your overall opinion of the narrator? Why or why not?

Analysis

1. How are the narrative style and structure of this story different from the majority of the previous stories?
