

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *The Things They Carried*

*by Tim O'Brien*

Copyright © 2004 by Prestwick House, Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938.  
1-800-932-4593. [www.prestwickhouse.com](http://www.prestwickhouse.com) Permission to copy this unit for  
classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her personal use. *This material,  
in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.*

ISBN: 978-1-58049-840-1

Item No. 200717

---

*The Things They Carried*

## **Pre-Reading**

1. A large part of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Free-write for five minutes on what you know of the war—what the fighting was about, how different Americans felt about it, who was drafted, the impact it has had on Vietnam veterans, and anything else your mind happens to land on.
2. Imagine that you're a soldier in the jungles of Vietnam. Like all soldiers, you carry at least twenty pounds of equipment with you as you trudge across the country; this does not include any personal items, such as photographs or chewing gum. Every personal thing you bring adds to the heavy weight on your shoulders.

Given that knowledge, describe five personal items you would carry with you to remind you of home, ease your nerves, and simply make your situation more bearable. Explain the significance each item holds for you.

## **The Things They Carried**

3. Martha signs her letters to Lieutenant Cross “Love, Martha,” but Cross understands that “Love” is only “a way of signing” and does not mean that Martha loves him romantically. Why do you think we automatically sign letters or e-mails “Love” when we don't necessarily mean that we deeply love the people to whom we are writing? Is it simply a meaningless convention? How do you sign *your* notes to friends? Address these questions in a detailed paragraph.

---

*Response Journal*

4. O'Brien tells us that the soldiers are called "legs or grunts" rather than men. Military speech is peppered with euphemisms—that is, terms and phrases that distance us from the fact that real, individual people with families and friends are being killed. "Collateral damage" is another example.

What do you think of this practice? Is it a helpful or harmful manipulation? Write a letter to a senator explaining your feelings on the subject.

5. Whenever Cross looks at his photograph of Martha, he thinks of "new things he should've done." He deeply regrets not taking the risk of making an open advance to Martha.

If you were shipped off to war today, immediately and without warning—and to a place where you might very well lose your life—what one risk would you regret not having taken back home? Describe it and explain why you haven't yet taken it.

6. In addition to all of the heavy equipment and personal effects the men carry, they also carry "unweighed fear."

Stretch your mind for a moment, and decide how much you think fear "weighs." Write a poem about the weight of fear.

7. Martha sends Cross a pebble, writing that it was the pebble's "separate-but-together" quality that reminded her of her and Cross's situation. Imagine that your closest friend has gone off to fight in a foreign war. What one, small thing would you send your friend to show that you are "separate-but-together"? Explain your decision in a descriptive paragraph.

8. Cross is entrusted with the lives of his men; he calls the shots—but he has trouble keeping his mind on anything but Martha. In a paragraph or two, describe a time when you were in a situation that required true presence of mind, but were unable to focus because a personal matter was occupying your every thought. What happened?

---

*The Things They Carried*

9. O'Brien tells us that Norman Bowker, "otherwise a very gentle person," carries a thumb with him that has been cut from a dead Vietnamese boy's body.

Such "war trophies" are not uncommon. If you were to fight in a war, do you think you would be interested in obtaining this kind of trophy? Do you think such trophies are barbaric, or simply par for the course? Address these questions in a paragraph, making sure to explain *why* you would or would not want such a trophy.

10. The Vietnam War comes across as highly disorganized in this story: the soldiers have "no sense of strategy or mission" and search villages "without knowing what to look for." How would you feel if you were a soldier thrust into this situation in a foreign country? How would it make you feel about your military—and its regard for your life? Elaborate.
11. After desperate firefights, the men struggle to play down their fears, "holding in the humiliation" of having been terrified for their lives. As O'Brien writes, they are "afraid of dying but...even more afraid to show it." They pass joints; they tell jokes.

More than simple embarrassment over their fear is at stake. How does acting like this after fights help the soldiers deal with their trauma? What do you think would happen if they were all open about their fears? Explain your answers in a paragraph or two.

12. O'Brien writes that the men carry "the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing."

What, in general terms (specific to all, not just you), do you think is the high school student's greatest fear? Explain your answer in a detailed paragraph, or, if you prefer, write a poem explaining it.

## **Love**

13. Cross and the narrator are eventually able to laugh and reminisce about their time in Vietnam, although the terrible things remain with them. In a paragraph, describe a situation or time in your life that was almost unbearable that you are able to talk casually—or even with amusement—about now.
14. Martha is firm but vague when she talks with Cross at their college reunion. Neither Cross nor we really learn what is driving her. Given what she says to him in their brief conversations, invent a “back story” for Martha. What has happened to her? What did Cross mean to her when she was younger?

Write Martha’s “story” in at least one page.

15. The narrator promises Cross that he won’t mention Ted Lavender (or perhaps Martha) when he writes about Cross in the future. Obviously, he breaks his promise. Is this wrong of him, given that we still ultimately feel sympathy for Cross?

Write an e-mail to the narrator in which you express agreement or disagreement with his decision to include Martha and Ted in Cross’s story. Be sure to explain *why* you agree or disagree.

---

*The Things They Carried*

**Spin**

16. Norman and Henry's checkers game stands out in dark contrast to the war. As the narrator writes, "The playing field was laid out in a strict grid...the enemy was visible...[t]here were rules."

In general, do you prefer having your (non-school) days laid out for you, scheduled and neatly organized, perhaps with your own "To-Do" list ready, or do you prefer to "wing it," not knowing or planning what you're going to do on Saturday night until you get there? Explain your answer; then explain whether you think your preference would change if you were in a situation like that of the narrator and his fellow soldiers.

17. Respond to the following quote from the man who went AWOL and lived it up in Danang, only to rejoin his unit. Elaborate on what it means to you and how it relates to your own life.

All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*.

18. O'Brien writes,

Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

Do the stories of your life—the ones you share with your friends, for example—perform the same function for you as they do for the narrator? If so, explain how they do; if not, describe what *does* perform that function for you. (Home movies? Photographs? Music mixes?)

19. The narrator is forty-three years old, and his daughter is surprised that his memories of Vietnam continue to obsess him. What *one* memory or story from your own life at your current age do you think you will still review on a regular basis twenty years from now? Describe it, and explain why you expect it will still be so significant to a much-older you.