

Summer Assignments for *The Things They Carried*

As you read O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, follow and complete the individual assignments. All of these assignments should be entered in a hardcover composition notebook. Each assignment must be handwritten in blue or black ink and each individual assignment must be labeled and have its own page(s).

1. Read handout #1 before you start the novel, then read pp. 1-26.
 - Make a list of the soldiers and the special items they carried.
2. Read handout #2, then read pp. 27- 61: "Love," "Spin," and "On the Rainy River."
 - Choose your favorite of the three stories and write a one-paragraph synopsis.
 - Write another paragraph about the ways memory unites these stories
3. Read pp. 62-84: "Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell a True War Story," and "The Dentist."
 - Identify the protagonist of each story.
 - Write a paragraph discussing the differences between memoir and fictions.
 - Is it acceptable to invent scenes or dialogue when writing a memoir? Why or why not?
 - Is it alright to add elements of real-life events in fiction writing? If so, must the author let the reader know what is factual, and what is not?
4. Read pp. 85- 110: "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong."
 - How does O'Brien's use of figurative language enhance the reader's experience? Explain with examples from the novel.
5. Read pp. 111-131: "Stockings," "Church," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Style."
 - Identify at least one object that functions as a symbol and discuss its symbolic importance.
6. Read pp. 137-162: "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes."
 - Review the stories and write a character analysis of Norman Bowker.
7. Read handout #3, then read pp. 163-188: "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip."
 - What is the relationship between truth and fact in *The Things They Carried*?
 - Why are facts important?
 - How much factual information do we need to understand the truth?
8. Read pp. 189-218: "The Ghost Soldiers."
 - Identify at least three themes explored in *The Things They Carried*.
9. Read pp. 219-246: "Night Life" and "The Lives of the Dead."
 - Write a short essay, **two hand-written pages**, exploring your personal reactions to the novel. Make sure to go beyond simply expressing a like or dislike of the novel.

Words from the Novel: Please define these 107 words and be able to use them in a sentence.

Expect a quiz over these words during the first week of class.

elusive distracted devout makeshift malaria awe ambush insignia
Artillery poise casualty zeal cowardice comport ruthless
forthrightly frugal naïve deferment comparable exile acquiescence
pious cryptic grotesque reticence hover vigil mockery skittish rectitude
surreal silhouette precede aesthetic proximity anarchy ambiguity peculiar
mundane fortified vulnerable coy tentative opaque audible waver
contempt vouch detonate rout privilege frail patriotic cadre grope
evaporate affluent descend flourish shrapnel maneuver disjointed
tangible feigned conceive recollection complicity discretion
preferable bearing traction happenstance submerged interpreter obligatory
embody solemn pagoda compress sensation gangrene reinforced
superstitious calculate earnest credential skeptic gyroscope taut posture
immense unattached atrocity sentiment peril stench lucid obscure snatch
defoliant deserted mellow inert blatant momentum skim

Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction

A critical success since its publication in 1990, *The Things They Carried* is considered one of the most valuable contributions to Vietnam War literature. Readers often disagree on the genre of the book. It is sometimes regarded as a group of interconnected short stories instead of a novel. Certainly each story—or chapter—stands alone successfully. Several of the stories were originally published in such magazines as *Esquire*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Playboy*, and *Gentleman's Quarterly*. Yet the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

The Things They Carried is told mainly from the first-person point of view of a narrator named Tim O'Brien who shares many of the same experiences as the author. There are two stories in the book that are not told from this perspective. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to alter the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers should ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam. Readers should be aware of changes in setting and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

O'Brien uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *The Things They Carried*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story's meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it's important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way the Vietnam War affects the soldiers in Alpha Company.

Conscription and the U.S. Draft

Although the United States Constitution does not directly mention the word “draft” (or even the older term—“conscription”), it does give Congress certain power. Article I, Section 8, states that Congress shall have the power to declare war; raise and support armies; maintain a navy; and provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining a militia.

In both peacetime and periods of conflict, men have been drafted to fill specific needs in our country’s armed forces. The draft in the United States is administered by the Selective Service System. On September 16, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act, which created the country’s first peacetime draft and formally established the agency. Even today, men ages 18 through 25 are required to register with the Selective Service. This provides a way for Congress to fill vacancies in the armed forces which cannot be filled through voluntary means.

During the Vietnam War, there were not enough volunteers to staff the military. A lottery was held on December 1, 1969, to determine the order of call for men of draft age. Three-hundred-sixty-six capsules containing birth dates were placed in a large glass container and drawn by hand to establish the order in which men would be drafted. The first birth date was assigned the number 1, meaning the men with that birth date would be called first. The drawing continued until all days of the year had been paired with numbers. Families across the country hoped their young men would get a high number.

Conscription has always been controversial, but during the Vietnam War draft evasion and resistance reached levels that hampered the war effort and ultimately helped end the conflict. Many draft resisters filed for conscientious objector status. A conscientious objector can declare that military service or combat duty is counter to his religious or moral beliefs, but must be able to demonstrate that the objection is long-lasting and sincere.

Some men facing the draft fled to Canada. As antiwar protests took hold on college campuses, students began burning their draft cards as acts of defiance. Though resisting the draft can carry stiff fines and even prison sentences, during the Vietnam War there were far too many people to punish. In 1977, President Carter granted amnesty to all those who had fled abroad in defiance of the draft, allowing them to return to the United States.

Although the U.S. does not currently have an active draft, young men must register so that, should a draft ever be instituted, the Selective Service will have lists of those eligible to serve. Since September 11, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have kept the idea of reinstating the draft in the public’s mind, but Congress has rejected all bills that call for conscription, and all the troops serving in the U.S. military have enlisted voluntarily.

The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre

The Quang Ngai Province, located on the south central coast of Vietnam, was targeted early in the Vietnam War because U.S. military officials suspected it of being a Viet Cong stronghold. By the end of 1967, most of the homes in the province had been destroyed and many thousands of civilians were homeless.

On March 16, 1968, the soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai six miles northeast of Quang Ngai. The company had sustained many casualties in the area over the previous weeks and emotions ran high. The troops, under the leadership of Lt. William Calley, entered the village firing although there were no reports of enemy fire. Eyewitnesses reported seeing old men bayoneted, women raped, and unarmed villagers—including children—shot in the back of the head.

Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam well after the horrific events of My Lai had taken place, but *The Things They Carried* examines the desensitization and brutality many troops experienced. In 1994, O'Brien accepted an assignment from the *New York Times* to return to Vietnam and write an article about it. "The Vietnam in Me" described O'Brien's experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry, and his reaction to the massacre at My Lai.

In the article, O'Brien writes:

What happened, briefly, was this. At approximately 7:30 on the morning of March 16, 1968, a company of roughly 115 American soldiers were inserted by helicopter just outside the village of My Lai. They met no resistance. No enemy. No incoming fire. Still, for the next four hours, Charlie Company killed whatever could be killed. They killed chickens. They killed dogs and cattle. They killed people, too. Lots of people. Women, infants, teen-agers, old men. [...]

Eventually, after a cover-up that lasted more than a year and after the massacre made nationwide

headlines, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison. Found guilty of the premeditated murder of "not less than" 22 civilians, Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but after legal appeals and sentence reductions, his ultimate jail time amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison[...]

Calley aside, only a handful of men faced formal court-martial proceedings, either for war crimes or for subsequent cover-up activities, with the end result of five acquittals and four judicially ordered dismissals. [...]

Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.

Americans first learned of My Lai in November 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* based on his conversations with Ron Ridenhour. A Vietnam veteran, Ridenhour learned of the events from members of Charlie Company. He had immediately appealed to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon, asking them to investigate the matter. In September 1969, as a result of a military investigation, Lt. Calley was charged with murder in the deaths of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

When Hersh's story hit the press two months later, it had even farther-reaching effects. As the shocking details of the massacre reached the public, support for the war began to wane, more draftees began to file for conscientious objector status, and U.S. draft policy was reexamined. A military commission found widespread failures of leadership and discipline among the troops of Charlie Company. For his story, Seymour Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for international reporting.