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Literary Analysis of “The Things They Carried”

ENG1300 Composition III/Literature

Short Story Analysis

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The main theme in “The Things They Carried,” written in 1986 by Tim O’Brien, is necessity. The objects tell us about the person who carried them on their person during the Vietnam War, and the things that they believed were necessary for their personal wellbeing and the mission they were on in a hostile conflict. Each soldier carried the same basic equipment, but the specialists and leaders had to carry different items to help them complete their jobs, as well as anything they believed to be of great sentimental value and worthy of adding a few extra ounces or pounds to their already heavy load. The things they carried were necessary, sentimental, or mentally tied to their experiences during the war.

“Among the necessities ... were P-38 can openers ... and two or three canteens of water,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 393), tells you the basic items that each soldier carried because they were deemed necessary. “As a lieutenant ... Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, ... and a .45-caliber pistol...” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 394), tells you Mr. Cross’ rank, as well as the items important to his job. “Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations... Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, ... bars of soap... Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers... Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of ... foot powder,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 393). Mr. Dobbins carried extra food because he had a bigger appetite than his fellow soldiers and wanted to make sure he did not miss any of the nutrition that he needed to keep going. Mr. Jensen wanted to maintain his hygiene and health, so he carried basic toiletries, as well as extra socks and powder to help prevent infection in his feet from walking through mud and water, and then continuing to march in wet socks. Mr. Lavender carried something to help him sleep at night when he was not supposed to be keeping an eye out

for danger while his companions slept.

“The things they carried were determined by some extent by superstition... Dave Jensen carried a rabbit’s foot,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 398), highlights the items they feel were necessities due to their beliefs. “Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament... his grandmother’s distrust of the white man, his grandfather’s old hunting hatchet...,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 393-394). Mr. Jensen keeps a rabbit’s foot as a good luck charm to help keep him safe through the war, this small item gives him a little bit of hope and peace of mind that he will be able to go home to his family when the war is finished. Mr. Bowker keeps a diary so that he can write down his thoughts and important details that he wants to remember when the war is over. Mr. Kiley has comic books for distraction when they are resting and not marching or fighting. Kiowa keeps a bible that was given to him by his father, as well as the beliefs of his grandmother, and a hatchet given to him by his grandfather. Kiowa’s faith helps him keep his head up through the trials and tribulations of war, and the distrust from his grandmother helps him keep his wits about him and an eye out for threats to his life.

“First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha... he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 393), tells us that these letters held deep sentimental value to Mr. Cross. He carries them with him every day and keeps them in plastic, so they do not get wet and ruined. He also keeps them at the bottom of his rucksack so that they are less likely to get folded and torn while he is marching. “Almost everyone humped

photographs....” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 394). Photographs are a wonderful way to keep the faces of your loved ones back home in your mind and gives the soldiers some sort of connection with the life they left behind when they were sent to war. It helps remind them of what they are fighting for and who is waiting for them back at home.

“They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 396). The soldiers are fully aware of the powerful weapons they are carrying with them every day while they march through the countryside of Vietnam. They know that they are capable of taking the lives of enemy soldiers, and that the enemy soldiers carry weapons just as dangerous as their own. “...Cross found himself trembling... He had loved Martha more than his men, and ... Lavender was now dead... he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach....” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 400). Mr. Cross blames himself for Mr. Lavender being shot and killed by enemy soldiers one night. Since he is the one in charge of their platoon, he feels that he is responsible for keeping his men alive, and he had been busy fantasizing about Martha when Mr. Lavender was shot. “Some carried themselves with a sort of ... resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humor or macho zeal... all afraid of dying... even more afraid to show it,” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 402). The soldiers all had their own responses to the traumas of war, and they all showed their feelings about it differently, but none of them wanted to be seen as cowardly or weak by admitting that they were afraid to die.

“What they carried varied by mission... mountains, they carried mosquito netting, machetes, canvas tarps, and extra bug juice... heavily mined [areas of operation], where the land

was dense with Toe Poppers and Bouncing Betties... twenty-eight pound mine detector... partly for safety, partly for the illusion of safety..." (O'Brien, 1986, p. 396-397). This gives you an idea of what equipment they had for each mission they were sent on. The necessities change based on the circumstances that the soldiers find themselves in each day. "... night missions... Kiowa always took along his New Testament and a pair of moccasins for silence... Jensen carried night-sight vitamins... Strunk carried his sling-slot... Kiley carried brandy and M&M's... Lavender carried the starlight scope... Dobbins carried his girlfriend's panty-hose... They call carried ghosts," (O'Brien, 1986, p. 397). The items considered necessary for stealth missions varied greatly between the soldiers, some of them carried things that were practical, while others carried things that would keep them occupied while they were waiting in the dark for a chance to strike.

The things they carried were decided by necessity, personal sentiments, and responses to the situations they found themselves in. Every soldier started off with the same basic equipment, and their burden was then added onto based on their rank and specialty in the field. The lowest ranking members of the platoon had the least amount to carry, both physically and mentally. The lieutenant of the platoon had to carry the heaviest emotional burden because he was responsible for maintaining the safety of his soldiers while they were carrying out their missions. The soldiers with specialized ranks, such as medic, machine gunner, or communications, had to carry the largest physical loads, which would often be split amongst several soldiers taking turns to carry the heaviest items and help lessen the burden on one soldier alone. They all carried the emotional burdens brought on by the trauma of war, and they helped to carry each other through the war.

References

O'Brien, T. (1986). The things they carried. In L.G. Kirsznner & S.R. Mandell (Eds.), *Compact Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* [VitalSource digital version] (pp. 393-405). Boston: Cengage.



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