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Fiction Analysis of "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien

ENG1300

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There is an enthralling fictional short story that sheds light on the feelings and hardships of the Vietnam soldier. “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien (1986), is a partly fictional short story about Vietnam soldiers and explains the relationship of each item that was carried throughout the war. Each character’s personality and personal struggle in the story comes to life, through uncertainty and hardship of war, by the things the soldiers carried.

Some of the items that each soldier carried would be constant and comforting in the story. There is the sense of comfort within the paragraph that states, “To carry something was to “hump” it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 394). Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha that he pretended to be love letters, and a good luck pebble that she sent in a letter. The story describes visions of Martha and her letters that Lieutenant Jimmy Cross would have during stressful situations as a soldier. The resupply choppers would drop new supplies that would have sparklers for July fourth and Easter eggs. Most all the characters carried photographs; however, the story gives detail into the comfort that Lieutenant Jimmy Cross had with the two photographs of Martha. Dave Jensen was superstitious and found comfort in carrying a lucky rabbit’s foot. Kiowa carried moccasins and a new testament bible that he loved the smell of. He would put it under his pillow. The story describes the comforting items that each soldier carried on night missions as “ghosts”.

Some items become an example of the many challenges and hardships that soldiers endured. The story states that the soldiers carried each other when they were wounded. The soldiers carried the land of Vietnam on themselves on their fatigues and boots. There is a sense of uncer-

tainty in the explanation of the undirected marching of the soldiers. The soldiers were in a constant state of survival mode without a plan of action. A powerful message within the short story states, “The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 399). There is meaningful display of hardship and loss towards Ted Lavender’s character by always mentioning the fact that he was shot when referring to the items that he carried. This is powerfully noticeable in the paragraph that states, “when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 394).

The story is very descriptive about all the things that each soldier carried as necessity. Ted Lavender is a character that was a scared person in the story. Therefore, Ted carried tranquilizers and “premium dope”. Dave Jensen is a character in the story that had to carry extra socks and foot powder to keep from getting athlete’s foot. Depending on the size of the soldier, habits, and metabolic rate, the characters carried more weight of items or more food. Henry Dobbin’s character is a larger man that carried extra rations. The characters in the story carried certain items based on their rank and field specialty. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross was a platoon leader. He carried things such as binoculars, compass, and a pistol. The reader can sense that lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries a heavy burden with his rank in the statement, “He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 394). The character, Mitchell Sanders, is an RTO and carried the PRC-25 radio that weighed twenty-six pounds. The character, Rat Kiley, is a medic and carried a satchel filled with things such as morphine, malaria tablets,

surgical tape. The story mentions that he carried comic books and M&Ms, which gives the feeling that Rat Kiley knew how to cheer soldiers up during a difficult time of being wounded.

An emotional part of the story is in the paragraph that explains the “emotional baggage” that the characters carried. Strong words of the paragraph state, “Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 402). The soldiers kept a strong composure despite inner emotional turmoil because they did not want to be looked down upon. The story uses the term “blushing of dishonor” that the men did not want to be known for. Therefore, the soldiers would keep up a front and make fun of those men that would coward themselves. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried the burden inside of him that Ted Lavender died because of his pretend love for Martha. He makes a strong gesture in burning her photographs to avoid negligence of his men.

Tim O’Brien individualizes each character in “The Things They Carried” by focusing on each type of item they carry through the war and describing the personal and difficult attachment in extraordinary detail. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is a constant character that is focused on in most of the story because of the burden of blame and grief that he carries for any loss of his platoon. The story brings to life the part of Vietnam that a reader cannot imagine or is oblivious to. This story gives an appreciation to the Vietnam soldier for enduring through a life of uncertainty and loss. As the story states, “and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry” (O’Brien, 1986, p. 400). This story gives tribute to the real Vietnam soldier by placing the reader inside the mind and heart of the character through the items that were carried on their journey in 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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