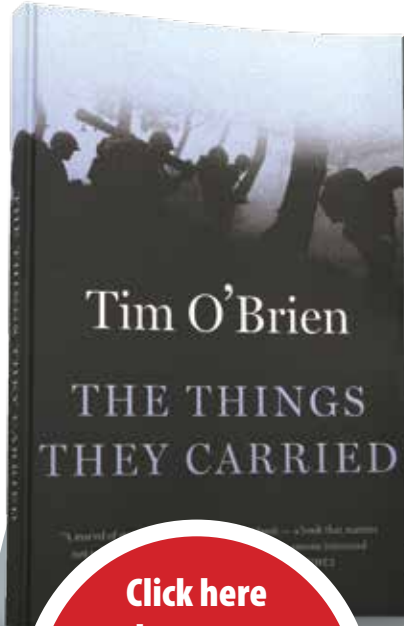


Includes samples from  
*The Things They Carried*  
Teaching Unit  
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# *The Things They Carried*

*by Tim O'Brien*

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*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?

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*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.

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*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?)

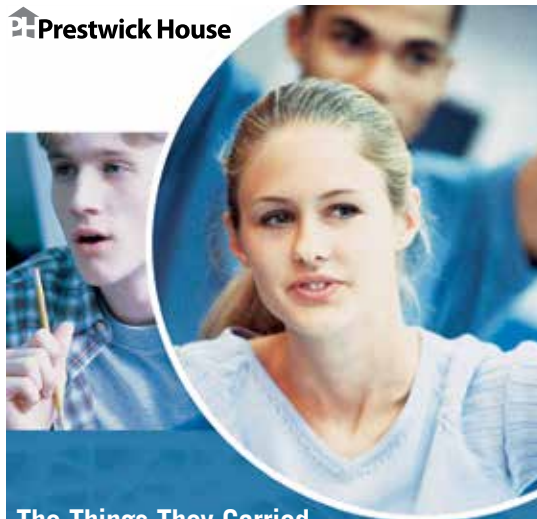
19. The narrator is forty-three years old, and his daughter is surprised that his memories of Vietnam continue to obsess him. What *one* memory or story from your own life at your current age do you think you will still review on a regular basis twenty years from now? Describe it, and explain why you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



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TIM O'BRIEN

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**The Things They Carried**

by Tim O'Brien

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### **A Short Summary of Tim O'Brien's Life**

Tim O'Brien, (born 1946), is credited with writing the essential fictional book about Vietnam. *The Things They Carried* is the winner of France's prestigious Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize; it was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. O'Brien was raised in small-town Minnesota; his father was an insurance salesman, and his mother was an elementary school teacher. He served as an infantryman in the Quang Ngai province from 1969-70. Many stories had been published by the time he returned home. In 1973, he published *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and began working for the *Washington Post*. After a year with the *Post*, he began writing books. His other titles include *Going After Cacciato*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, *The Nuclear Age*, and many other short stories and articles.

Note to teachers: There is strong language and very gory, graphic scenes in this novel. Due to the subject matter, the Vietnam War, the language and detail is necessary to depict the emotion and confusion the soldiers must have felt during such a painful period. The language, wartime, violence, and gore should be discussed before beginning the book.

All references come from the Broadway Books edition of *The Things They Carried*, copyright 1990.

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the author's writing style
2. recognize the dual first-person narration of Tim the character and Tim the author
3. discuss the pros and cons of going to war
4. define and cite instances from the book of the following literary terms:
  - flashback
  - sensory images
  - irony
5. place *The Things They Carried* in its correct chronological period and understand how the events helped mold O'Brien's life
6. discuss various aspects of O'Brien's writing style
7. recognize the importance of "story truth" and "historical truth."
8. discuss the purpose of storytelling
9. understand a soldier's experience at war
10. recognize some elements of a "true war story."

# The Things They Carried

## Chapter One

### The Things They Carried

#### VOCABULARY

**confiscate**—to seize  
**dysentery**—a disorder of the lower intestinal tract  
**foxhole**—a shallow pit dug by a soldier in combat  
**grunts**—infantrymen  
**hump**—to carry on the back (slang)  
**interval**—a space between  
**laxity**—laziness  
**malaria**—an infectious disease spread by mosquitoes  
**platoon**—subdivision of a company of troops  
**rucksack**—backpack

1. Give a description of Martha. How do Martha and Jimmy Cross feel about each other?

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2. Why is it significant that Martha never mentions the war in her letters? What does she represent?

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3. List some items that the men carry. How do certain items reflect the individual?

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4. What does the author intend by relaying the weights of all the items the men carry?

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## Chapter Six

### Friends

#### VOCABULARY

**dustoff**—a helicopter picking up dead bodies from the war (slang)  
**tourniquet**—a device or tightly encircled bandage used to stop bleeding

1. Who are the friends in this chapter?

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2. What is the contract that the two friends make with each other? How is this contract peculiar?

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3. What happens to Strunk?

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4. Do Strunk and Jensen keep their pact with one another?

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5. Explain why the news of Strunk’s death “seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous relief.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

### Style

1. Why is the girl dancing?

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2. Why does the girl cover her ears when she is dancing?

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3. Why does Dobbins get upset with Azar?

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4. Why does Tim O'Brien include this chapter?

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BY TIM O'BRIEN



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-Reading****Research and Context**

**Objective:** Researching the events of 1969 to provide an historical context for our reading of *The Things They Carried*

**Activity**

The events in *The Things They Carried* take place primarily in 1969. Having some knowledge of what was going on in the world politically and culturally will provide an historical context for our reading. Use the Internet, an encyclopedia, or some other reference source to thoroughly fill in the chart on the next page. One cultural event has been provided for you as an example.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“The Things They Carried”****Euphemism**

Objective: Understanding euphemism

**Activity**

A *euphemism* is, at best, a more gentle or tactful term for a difficult, painful, or embarrassing subject. One who says “We had the dog *put to sleep*” instead of “We had the dog killed” is using a euphemism. Far less innocently, euphemisms are sometimes used by militaries or politicians to intentionally mislead or appease the public. These euphemisms may distance citizens from a harsh reality, as when the Nazis’ massacre of Jews in the Holocaust was referred to as “The Final Solution.”

List four euphemisms the soldiers use for “killed” in “The Things They Carried.”

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Complete the chart on the next page by providing, in the left column, the literal meanings for the military euphemisms in the right column. It may be necessary to do some research on the Internet or at the library.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Love”****Interviews**

**Objective:** Interviewing a subject who lived through the Vietnam War

**Activity**

In “Love,” O’Brien and Cross meet to look back over their experiences in Vietnam.

Interview a person who was either a teenager or an adult in America or Vietnam during the war. During your interview, ask your subject the following three **Required Interview Questions** and another **five** questions of your own devising. When finished, you will be responsible for turning in:

- a list of the additional five questions you asked your subject, and
- a one-page write-up of what you learned from your subject.

Be prepared to share details and anecdotes from your interview in a class discussion to take place on \_\_\_\_\_.

**REQUIRED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Did you support or oppose American involvement in the Vietnam War? How did you show your support or opposition?
2. Were you drafted, or did you know anyone (even as an acquaintance) who was? How did you or your acquaintance handle being drafted?
3. Since the Vietnam War, do you think the United States has gotten or ever will get into “another Vietnam”?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## “On the Rainy River”

### Point of View

**Objective:** Recognizing and working with point of view

#### Activity

Read the below selections—from *The Things They Carried* and other novels—and complete the chart that follows them. Then answer the question below the chart.

Selection from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book—which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before.

Selection from *Night* by Elie Wiesel:

At nine o'clock, Sunday's scenes began all over again. Policemen with truncheons yelling: "All Jews outside!" We were ready. I was the first to leave. I did not want to see my parents' faces. I did not want to break into tears. We stayed sitting down in the middle of the road, as the others had done the day before yesterday. There was the same infernal heat. The same thirst. But there was no longer anyone left to being us water. I looked at my house, where I had spent so many years in my search for God; in fasting in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah; in imagining what my life would be like. Yet I felt little sorrow. I thought of nothing.

Selection from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle:

The house shook.  
 Wrapped in her quilt, Meg shook.  
 She wasn't usually afraid of the weather. —It's not just the weather, she thought.—It's the weather on top of everything else. On top of me. On top of Meg Murry doing everything wrong.  
 School. School was all wrong. She'd been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade. That morning one of her teachers had said crossly, "Really, Meg, I don't understand how a child with parents as brilliant as yours are supposed to be can be such a poor student. If you don't manage to do a little better you'll have to stay back next year."  
 The window rattled madly in the wind, and she pulled the quilt close about her.  
 Everybody was asleep. Everybody except Meg.  
 How could they sleep? All day long there had been hurricane warnings. How could they leave her up in the attic in the rickety brass bed, knowing that the roof might be blown right off the house, and she tossed out into the wild night sky to land who knows where?  
 —You asked to have the attic bedroom, she told herself savagely.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“On the Rainy River”****Survey****Objective:** Taking a survey and summarizing its results**Activity**

O'Brien challenges us to decide how we would respond to the draft and the opportunity to escape military duty by fleeing to Canada:

You're at the bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.

What would you do?

Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?

Take a survey of twenty people you know that are *not* in this class. Phrase your survey question as follows:

If you were drafted into a war you did not believe your country should be fighting, and you could not claim exempt or conscientious objector status, would you choose to leave the country illegally, knowing that it may mean you can never come back, or to fight in the war, knowing that you will be made to kill people and may get seriously injured or die?

When you have gotten twenty answers, tally up how many of your subjects would leave the country illegally and how many would fight. Record them below, then answer the questions that follow.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## “How to Tell a True War Story”

### Collage

**Objective:** Interpreting a principle artistically

#### Activity

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purple orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

—from “How to Tell a True War Story”

In a sentence or two, describe what you think O'Brien means by the phrase “the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference.”

Using images you have created yourself, images from magazines and the Internet, or both, create a collage that articulates the “beauty” of one of the following:

- illness (in general or in particular)
- war
- poverty

Your collage must measure at least 11x17 inches and must not include any text. Rather allow the juxtaposed images to speak together and for themselves.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“The Dentist”****Motivation**

**Objective:** Exploring embarrassment as a motivating factor in our own lives

**Activity**

Curt Lemon has a tooth pulled out of embarrassment. More shockingly, O'Brien reports for military duty rather than fleeing to Canada out of embarrassment.

To what extent is fear of embarrassment a motivating factor in your own life? Complete the questionnaire by circling the answers that most closely reflect your feelings.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Stockings” and “Church”****Superstition**

**Objective:** Thinking critically about the significance and uses of superstition

**Activity**

Henry Dobbins wears his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck for luck. O'Brien writes, "Like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins [feels] the pull of superstition." With your group, complete the chart below and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

What impact do superstitions have on the members of your group? One common superstition has been supplied for you in the chart below; fill in the first column with nine more. Then note down the number of members who do now or used to believe in each superstition in the second column. Note down the number who *never* subscribed to each superstition in the third column.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**“Ambush”****Dramatic Recitation****Objective:** Reading and dramatically performing poetry written on Vietnam**Activity**

“Ambush” is concerned with a writer’s attempts to make sense of what he saw and did in the Vietnam War. In addition to fiction and memoir, an amazing body of poetry has been written by veterans and others in response to Vietnam. Reading and listening to some of it in class will enrich our study of *The Things They Carried* and the individual’s response to the war.

Each group is responsible for finding—using the library or the Internet—a poem that deals with the Vietnam War and for performing the poem for the rest of the class. Listed below are just a few of the many print sources for poetry about the war; using “Vietnam War poetry” as a search term at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) will also yield a wealth of possibilities. **IMPORTANT:** Once you have chosen a poem, provide me with a typed copy of it so I can approve it and make sure that no two groups have selected the same poem.

After I have approved your poem, you will need to make many choices concerning your group’s performance of it. Will you read your poem in unison? In turns? Will one person read it alone while the others do something else (play a drum, hold a prop, hum a hymn)? Will you start out at full volume and end up in a whisper? Dim the lights in the classroom? These options and any others you might come up with are all up to your group. Just make sure to remember the *reasons* behind your choices. After your performance, your group must turn in a brief summary and explanation of your dramatic interpretation of the poem.

**PARTIAL LIST OF POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR POETRY RELATED TO THE VIETNAM WAR**

*Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* ed. Carolyn Forché (W.W. Norton and Company: 1993)

*Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 1948-1993.* ed. Kevin Bowen, Ba Chung Nguyen, and Bruce Weigl (University of Massachusetts Press: 1998)

*60 on the 60’s: A Decade’s History in Verse.* ed. Robert McGovern and Richard Syder (Ashland Poetry Press: 1970)

*Voices From the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of America and Vietnam, 1965-1993* ed. Larry Rottman (Event Horizon Press: 1993)

*The Oxford Book of War Poetry* ed. Jon Stallworthy (Oxford University Press: 1984)

– poems by Yusef Komunyakaa, Denise Levertov, Bruce Weigl, and Howard Nemerov