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Teaching Tim O'Brien's

The Things They Carried

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Elizabeth Osborne



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Things They Carried*

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED is a novel about the Vietnam War, but it is also a novel about writing about the Vietnam War. A person with the same name as the author, Tim O'Brien, appears as a character in the novel, sometimes addressing the reader about the process of writing the book. This technique in which a work of fiction acknowledges itself as such is called metafiction.

Just as he does not observe the traditional separation between characters and audience, O'Brien does not restrict his storytelling technique to linear chronology. The book jumps around in time from chapter to chapter. Some chapters unfold in the present tense, allowing the reader to experience what is happening along with the characters. In other sections, a removed narrator tells the story in the past tense.

One of the main themes of the book is that stories, which we invent to convey emotional realities and to explain why things are the way they are, can be more real than facts. Fiction, in other words, is more powerful and true than nonfiction. The author emphasizes this idea by giving the book the subtitle, "A work of fiction by Tim O'Brien."

List of Characters

Tim O'Brien – the narrator of some of the novel's vignettes; is not to be confused with the *author* Tim O'Brien. At times the character and author are, in fact, one and the same; at other times, however, the character within the stories is as much a fictional construction as any other character. Drafted into the Vietnam War immediately after graduating from college, he considered running away to Canada but eventually became a soldier. The book describes his experiences during and after the War; there is also a story involving nine-year-old Tim O'Brien.

O'Brien's platoon

Jimmy Cross – A first lieutenant and the leader of Tim's platoon; he is in love with a woman, Martha Cross, who does not love him. A former ROTC cadet, he is a reluctant leader and carries a good deal of guilt for the soldiers who are injured or killed under his command.

Formalist Theory Applied to *The Things They Carried*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining Incidents of Recurrence and Repetition in the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Things They Carried* Formalism Activity One: Repetition and Recurrence

Note: Each student will need several copies of the second page in order to complete this activity.

2. As a full class, peruse the chapter entitled “The Man I Killed,” and complete the chart.
3. Discuss how the meaning or significance of the same detail (word, phrase, description, idea, etc.) can change with each repetition.
4. Divide the class into three groups (or a number divisible by three).
5. Assign each, or allow each to choose, one of the following chapters
 - “Spin”
 - “On the Rainy River”
 - “Ambush”
6. Have each group study its assigned chapter and complete the chart.
7. Reconvene the class and allow each group to reports its findings.
8. Discuss the impact of repetition on the tone and meaning of the novel.

Psychoanalytical/Freudian Theory Applied to *The Things They Carried*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One**Tracing the Id, Ego, and Superego in *The Things They Carried***

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Tracing the Id, Ego, and Superego in *The Things They Carried*. Students will need several copies of the handout.
2. As a class, review the definitions of the id, ego and superego from the “Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory.”
3. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
4. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the three aspects of the personality: id, ego, superego.
5. Have each group peruse the novel and identify those episodes in which its assigned personality aspect seems to dominate. Then have them provide the information requested on the handout.
6. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings. As groups report, note incidents of strong agreement or disagreement.
7. As a class, discuss the complete novel as a study of the impact of war on the human psyche.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *The Things They Carried*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern

- Ragnarok: the final battle between two feuding segments of the Norse pantheon. Both sides are largely decimated, as is the human race. Two humans survive to repopulate the human world and worship a new pantheon formed of the gods who survive the battle.
- the Great Flood: found in the Judeo-Christian worldview and other belief systems from around the world, the story of a great deluge that covered the earth with water, killing an entire generation of life forms on earth. A handful survived, repopulating the earth. According to the biblical account, the flood was a punishment for a generation that disregarded God's laws.
- the TABOO: the commission of a culturally forbidden act, such as incest or patricide, often unknowingly or inevitably. Any act or attitude that could be seen as “unnatural,” a crime against the ways Nature is supposed to operate.
- the BANQUET: fellowship; nourishment of the body and soul; display of wealth; often used as a symbol for salvation, Heaven. ■