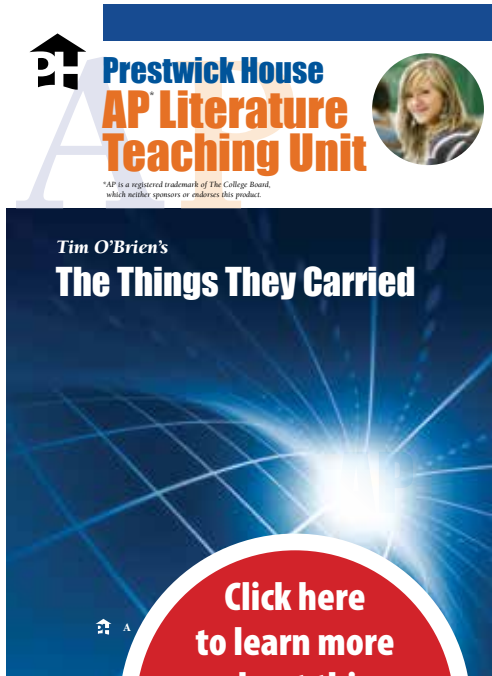




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Teaching Unit

The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien

written by Eva Richardson



Prestwick House

Item No. 303438

The Things They Carried

Objectives

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

1. outline the influence of the Vietnam War on the characters and events in the novel.
2. describe and analyze the interplay between truth and fiction within the context of the novel.
3. explore narrative techniques, particularly the effects of shifting points of view throughout the novel.
4. discuss the text as a coherent novel or as a collection of loosely connected short stories and recollections about the war.
5. analyze the novel as social commentary on American involvement in the Vietnam War.
6. study the relationship between writing and reality as modeled by Tim O'Brien.
7. evaluate and analyze the novel as an example of the "war literature" genre.
8. analyze the novel as an instructional manual for how to write well.
9. trace the connection between names and identity in the novel.
10. consider the interplay between death/loss and love/intimacy/romance within the context of the novel.
11. analyze the complex and ambiguous meanings of "to carry."
12. study the powerful emotions of guilt and shame for the characters in the novel.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
15. offer a close reading of *The Things They Carried* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What is the significance of “truth” within the context of the novel?
2. Why can't the novel be considered a memoir of author Tim O'Brien's war experiences as a soldier in Vietnam?
3. What effect do changes in narrative perspective have on the reader? How do O'Brien's changes in point of view reinforce the themes of his novel?
4. To what extent is the novel a war novel? An anti-war novel?
5. What function(s) does the character Kiowa fulfill within the novel? As a character, a soldier, a religious man? Why does O'Brien return to Vietnam with Kiowa's moccasins?
6. What significance do the various things soldiers carry hold within the context of the novel for the different characters?
7. What is O'Brien's perception of how people “at home” react to and relate to the soldiers' experiences in Vietnam?
8. What motivates Tim O'Brien to go to war? What motivates other soldiers?
9. What motivates author Tim O'Brien to write his novel?
10. What function do female characters fulfill within the novel? Martha? Mary Anne? Linda? Others?
11. What role does language play with regard to the interaction between soldiers in Vietnam?

The Things They Carried

“The Things They Carried”

1. How does the ambiguous nature of the term “carry” introduce the soldiers and the themes of the novel?

2. What does the fact that Lt. Jimmy Cross carries a picture of Martha reveal about his character?

3. What does the phrase “they searched the villages without knowing what to look for” reveal about the soldiers’ attitudes toward the war?

4. How does Kiowa react to Lavender’s death?

5. How does the phrase, “men killed, and died, because they were too embarrassed not to” explicate the theme of shame and guilt?

“How to Tell a True War Story”

1. How does the chapter develop the theme of truth versus fiction?

2. Why does O’Brien insist that war stories are not moral?

3. Why does O’Brien try to reconstruct what Lemon must have experienced the moment of his death?

4. How does O’Brien use levels of language to illustrate the soldiers’ experiences and attitudes?

5. According to O’Brien, why is it difficult or impossible to generalize about war?

“Good Form”

1. What ultimately is the power of storytelling?

“Field Trip”

1. What is the significance of the title of this vignette?

2. Why does O’Brien take Kathleen to the scene of Kiowa’s death?

3. What is the significance of the simile O’Brien uses to explain his inability to move while standing in the field of mush?
