

Overview of *The Things They Carried*

Point of view: 1st person, told from the author's point of view and based on his experiences in the Vietnam War, but classified as a novel because of the fictionalization of some elements

Title: refers to both the physical things carried by soldiers (their military and personal burdens) and their emotional and psychological burdens

Setting: Vietnam in the late 1960s/early 1970s during the Vietnam War; various places in the U.S. before and after the war

Structure of the book: not linear; told as a disconnected but related series of stories and essays from the point of view of a soldier reflecting on his war experiences many years later

Major events in the book:

- O'Brien's drafting
- O'Brien's killing of an enemy soldier
- the death of Curt Lemon
- the death of Kiowa
- Norman Bowker's suicide

Style: straightforward and mostly plain language, but uses military jargon

- Deals not just with war experiences but with the effect of those experiences on the American soldiers in O'Brien's platoon, as well as O'Brien's struggle before the war to decide whether to obey his draft notice or escape to Canada

Themes and motifs:

- the nature of truth: O'Brien is interested in the truth of a soldier's experience of war (subjective, experiential truth rather than objective, absolute, factual truth); he is intentionally cryptic about which stories in the book actually happened and which details and events are made up for the purpose of conveying a larger truth about war; many of the conclusions he comes to are the opposite of what you might expect (see the courage example below)
- the nature of courage (often not what it appears to be; e.g. O'Brien calls his own decision to go to the war a cowardly decision)
- moral relativity and immoral actions engendered by war
- the sense of purposelessness shared by many men in war (only survival really matters)
- horror, guilt, and confession: many of the characters feel some burden of guilt and are haunted by their experiences and actions in the war; confessions, particularly by O'Brien himself, play a major role in the story

Overview of *The Things They Carried*