

The Things They Carried Practice Passage Analysis

This prompt is based on the section of “Field Trip” starting on page 184 (“In the second week...”) and ending on page 185 (“‘Stuff,’ I told her.”)

Prompt: How does O’Brien convey the distance between himself and his daughter, on the one hand, and his current self and his experiences of twenty years ago, on the other?

Notes on the passage:

Juxtaposition/contrast: continual back-and-forth between his memories and he current reality, between what he's thinking about and Kathleen's reaction/behavior

Mention of the "tourist stuff": Kathleen experiences Vietnam as a tourist

- "side trip": he hasn't made an effort to present his emotional agenda as the main reason for the trip, even though for him it clearly is the main reason
- "time was short": trip was rushed, but conveying something like this takes time
- "my friend Kiowa": someone Kathleen never knew—his friend, not hers

His own sense of the ineffectiveness of this "presentation": "I wondered if it was all a mistake."

Contrast between pleasant current reality and horrific details of his memory: "quiet sunny day," "birds and butterflies"

Suggests that there is nothing special to objectively distinguish the field from anywhere else: "ordinary," "rural-anywhere"—only he can see it the way he sees it

Kathleen's preoccupation with magic tricks—much more interesting than the scene before her

Description of the scene: all of the physical signs of the conflict are gone:

- things buried in the earth, invisible, symbolic of the experiences that she can't share, that are "invisible" to her

Suggests that memory and emotion distort perception of reality in a way that can't be experienced by those who don't share those memories and emotions ("the field was not the field I remembered")—they even alienate his present self from his past self

Unable to experience a real emotional response: "it simply wasn't there"

- metaphorical comparison of mud to transformative experience: "all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud"
- blame he places on the field: "blamed it for taking away the person I had once been"—personification—like a person who has robbed him of himself

"Now, it was just what it was.": physical reality that is all that Kathleen can see (and to some extent the O'Brien of the present) vs. the emotional/symbolic reality that it has for him because of the memories he associates with it

- it only has physical reality; has lost its emotional power even for him
- implies that the power of those memories has diminished: "awkwardness of remembering"

Laconic dialogue between the two: no real communication in the exchange at the end of the excerpt

- she is impatient and sarcastic: "I hope you're having fun," "Can we go now?"
- he is uncommunicative: doesn't respond to her curiosity about the package ("Stuff"), doesn't explain his thoughts and feelings