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Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien

written by Eva Richardson

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The Things They Carried

Objectives

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

- outline the influence of the Vietnam War on the characters and events in the novel.
- describe and analyze the interplay between truth and fiction within the context of the novel.
- explore narrative techniques, particularly the effects of shifting points of view throughout the novel.
- discuss the text as a coherent novel or as a collection of loosely connected short stories and recollections about the war.
- analyze the novel as social commentary on American involvement in the Vietnam War.
- study the relationship between writing and reality as modeled by Tim O'Brien.
- evaluate and analyze the novel as an example of the “war literature” genre.
- analyze the novel as an instructional manual for how to write well.
- trace the connection between names and identity in the novel.
- consider the interplay between death/loss and love/intimacy/romance within the context of the novel.
- analyze the complex and ambiguous meanings of “to carry.”
- study the powerful emotions of guilt and shame for the characters in the novel.
- respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
- respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
- 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.

Background Information

THE WAR IN VIETNAM:

The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, developed as a result of European Colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. In 1954, French Colonial rule in Vietnam, which had lasted for roughly one century, ended after years of conflict between the native Vietnamese and the French Colonial occupiers. France was forced to withdraw from Vietnam, and the country was divided into two separate sections during the Geneva Peace Accords of 1954.

The partition of the country was largely influenced by the Cold War that shaped the post-WWII world: North Vietnam was henceforth controlled by Vietnamese Communists who established a strict Communist state, while the southern part of Vietnam became a non-Communist state with the help of the American administration under President Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower and other western supporters feared the spread of Communism and supported the Southern state in order to prevent the Communist north from gaining excessive power. Over the next decade, North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front threatened the stability of the U.S.-supported southern Vietnamese state. When the United States feared that Communists were gaining ground and jeopardizing the safety of the Southern Vietnamese government, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent the first U.S. combat troops to Vietnam in 1965.

The United States fought in Vietnam until 1975, when the country was reunited under Communist rule. Overall, the Vietnam War was fought in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and ultimately resulted in immense casualties for the Vietnamese as well as the Americans. From the onset, America's involvement in the Vietnam War has been heavily criticized both internationally and domestically. Anti-war sentiments grew especially when American involvement in the war proved to lay a heavy burden on the American military, economy, and morale.

ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT:

The War in Vietnam sparked one of the most significant and influential anti-war movements in U.S. history. The anti-war movement arose directly out of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. In fact, Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of the first outspoken critics of American involvement in the war. He believed that the war in Vietnam demanded too many casualties and put a severe strain on the American economy. Moreover, Americans voiced a growing concern about the moral justifications offered by the U.S. administration for supporting the South Vietnamese government and entering the war. In fact, it became increasingly clear that the South Vietnamese government supported by the United States was not only opposed by the Communist Northern Vietnam state but by countless South Vietnamese citizens as well. The anti-war movement quickly spread, particularly on college campuses and in intellectual circles. Demonstrators began taking to the streets and voicing their dissent with U.S.

policy. News of massacres among Americans and Vietnamese as well as growing awareness of massive casualties, as, for example, during the so-called Tet Offensive of 1968, forced President Lyndon B. Johnson to announce that he would not run for reelection in 1968. Over the years, anti-war sentiment reached every corner of American society. Public figures continued to speak out against the war and headed demonstrations and marches. Young men attempted to escape the draft by crossing into Canada, objecting to the war on moral and ethical grounds. After the end of the war, President Jimmy Carter granted a pardon to all Americans who had avoided the draft. When the U.S. finally withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, more than \$120 billion had been spent on the war.

THE THEME OF SHAME:

The novel's predominant narrator, the character Tim O'Brien, presents shame as a powerful motivator for getting involved in the war. In the chapter "On the Rainy River," O'Brien outlines his reaction to receiving his draft notice from the U.S. government. He first describes the vision he has of himself as a righteous human being:

All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit.

O'Brien quickly explains how this noble vision becomes challenged when he is faced with the draft notice. He recalls the "modest stand against the war" he had taken in college and describes his inner struggle to come to terms with his moral objections to the war on the one hand and his obligations as a son, a citizen, and a human being afraid of shame on the other hand. O'Brien seriously considers leaving the United States and crossing into Canada in order to stay true to his conscience. Yet, he is overwhelmed by a feeling of shame when he envisions how his parents, his classmates, and the people living in his town will react. He explains: "What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me."

O'Brien is not ashamed to follow his conscience, but he cannot bear the thought of embarrassing himself, as he says, in front of the people in his life. Ultimately, he decides to go to war not because he believes in the American involvement, but because he "was a coward."

Other characters, too, display the same sense of shame while they are in the midst of the Vietnam War. In the chapter "The Dentist," for example, O'Brien describes how his comrade Curt Lemon reacted when he was undergoing a routine dental examination. Because of a life-long fear of dentists, Curt Lemon faints in the examination tent during his examination. Driven by shame and the fear that he has embarrassed himself in front of his comrades, Lemon later asks the dentist to pull a perfectly healthy tooth.

THE THEME OF GUILT:

One of the many things soldiers who fought in Vietnam carry, according to character and narrator Tim O'Brien, is the psychological feeling of guilt experienced when faced with the death of a fellow soldier. O'Brien explains that guilt is a complex matter, because it is not necessarily associated with direct responsibility for another soldier's demise. It stems, rather, from a soldier's feeling of loss and powerlessness when faced with the reality that the death of a friend and fellow soldier is, often, inevitable. The helplessness experienced by the soldiers, according to O'Brien, establishes itself in a profound feeling of guilt. As O'Brien explains in the chapter "The Things They Carried," "they carried all the ghosts," they "shared the weight of memory."

In the chapter "In the Field," O'Brien outlines how the death of a fellow soldier named Kiowa haunts a number of soldiers in different ways. Jimmy Cross, the troop leader, for example, ponders what he "should've done," while another soldier fears that his flashlight was responsible for attracting enemy fire: "Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight made it happen. Dumb and dangerous. And as a result his friend Kiowa was dead." Ultimately, soldiers experience guilt because they know that death is unavoidable. As soldiers, they are helpless, yet they contribute to death and are forced to come to terms with death due to their participation in the war:

When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote. In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever.

THE THEME OF WAR VERSUS INTIMACY AND LOVE:

Throughout the novel, the burden of war is countered by a desire for human connectedness and intimacy or love. In several chapters, O'Brien narrates the story of Lt. Jimmy Cross, who clings to the image and memory of a girl, Martha, from his hometown although he knows that Martha does not love him. In the chapter "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Rat Kiley tells the story of Mark Fossie and his sweetheart Mary Anne. According to Rat Kiley, Mark Fossie arranged for Mary Anne to come to Vietnam and live with the troops. The girl subsequently becomes a soldier herself and abandons her relationship with Mark. Although O'Brien later reveals that the story of Mary Anne as a fighter might not have been true, the tale illustrates the soldiers' desire to narrate stories that involve their loved ones or sweethearts.

THE THEME OF TRUTH:

The Things They Carried complicates the distinction between truth and fiction. Continuously throughout the novel, character and predominant narrator, Tim O'Brien, calls into question the reality of his own stories. In fact, Tim O'Brien as a character himself blurs the line between truth and fiction. On the one hand, he is the author of the novel; on the other hand, he also functions as a character within his own novel. In the early pages of the novel, O'Brien the character/narrator claims that he is on a mission to finally tell the true story of his experiences in Vietnam: "Most of this I've told before, or at least hinted at, but what I have never told is the full truth." At the onset of the chapter entitled "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien declares, "This is true." As the chapter progresses, however, O'Brien adjusts his definition of truth. He explains that telling a lie sometimes enables a writer to represent the truth of his experiences better than simply presenting the "facts." Moreover, O'Brien states that truth is not a fixed concept. Instead, it is a fluid experience that changes from one person to the next. O'Brien says, "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way."

Later, O'Brien conveys why a "true war story" inevitably contains elements of make-believe: "In war, you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true."

To his daughter Kathleen, the character Tim O'Brien attempts to explain the reality of telling a lie:

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. 'Daddy, tell the truth', Kathleen can say, 'did you ever kill anybody?' And I can say, honestly, 'Of course not'. Or I can say, honestly, 'Yes.'

Literary and Narrative Techniques:

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES:

The chapters in *The Things They Carried* are narrated from a variety of viewpoints. The opening chapter, “The Things They Carried,” is written from the perspective of a third-person narrator. For most of the chapter, this third-person narrator relates the events from the point of view of Lt. Jimmy Cross. At times, however, the narrator switches to present ideas and events from the perspective of another character. Early in the narrative, for example, the third-person narrator moves from presenting the story from Jimmy Cross’s viewpoint to the perspective of his fellow soldier Kiowa:

Shrugging, Kiowa pulled off his boots. He wanted to say more, just to lighten up his sleep, but instead he opened his New Testament beneath his head as a pillow. The fog made things seem hollow and unattached. He tried not to think about Ted Lavender.

Starting with chapter two, “Love,” the narrative viewpoint changes from a third-person to a first-person perspective. A new narrator, a character named Tim O’Brien, emerges to tell his war experiences. Throughout the remaining chapters, Tim O’Brien, who cannot always be considered synonymous with the author Tim O’Brien, tells how and why he recorded the experiences he and his comrades lived through in Vietnam. At times, the narrative perspective offers third-person insights into the minds of other characters.

Narrative viewpoint and storytelling are central concerns in the novel. Several soldiers function as storytelling characters in the novel. All in all, *The Things They Carried* is a complex work that presents deep layers of various narrative perspectives as it explores the craft of storytelling.

CHRONOLOGY AND CHAPTER STRUCTURE:

The individual chapters in *The Things They Carried* comprise loosely connected segments of the novel as a whole. In fact, several of the chapters were individually published as self-contained essays prior to their incorporation into the novel. Furthermore, the events in the novel, moving from chapter to chapter, are not told according to a strict chronological order. While the novel starts out discussing the soldiers and their individual burdens in Vietnam in the first chapter, “The Things They Carried,” the start of the second chapter forms the beginning of a retrospective account of the events.

Individual events narrated by various characters are also subject to an inconsistent chronological order. One experience, for example, might be told from one character’s perspective first. In a later chapter, the same experience might be recounted from a different character’s viewpoint. Kiowa’s death, for example, is recounted on numerous occasions in the novel. Curt Lemon’s death, too, is narrated from a variety of viewpoints early on, even though Curt Lemon figures as a prominent character in several later chapters. The novel moves back and forth in time in order to show the complexity of the characters’ war experiences.

PROFANE LANGUAGE AS COPING MECHANISM:

Throughout the novel, Tim O’Brien and other characters narrating the events of the Vietnam War resort to the use of profane language, particularly when discussing a difficult or frightening experience or the death of a fellow soldier. It becomes clear that profanity and harsh language function as a coping mechanism for the soldiers. On the one hand, this coping mechanism relates to the theme of shame: the young men in Vietnam are embarrassed when their comrades realize that they are afraid, or that a noise frightened them without a reason. Consequently, they use profane language to cover their insecurities and gloss over their sense of embarrassment.

On the other hand, profane language becomes a strategy for coping with real loss. When Kiowa dies, for example, several of the soldiers focus on describing, in graphic terms, the field of human waste where Kiowa died in order to downplay the sense of loss they are experiencing:

Azar kept shaking his head. He coughed and shook his head and said, ‘Man, talk about irony. I bet if Kiowa was here, I bet he’d just laugh. Eating shit—it’s your classic irony’. ‘Fine’, said Norman Bowker. ‘Now pipe down’. Azar sighed. ‘Wasted in the waste’, he said. ‘A shit field. You got to admit it it’s pure world class irony’.

MEMOIR VS. FICTION:

The Things They Carried blurs the line between the genres of memoir and fiction. This difficult distinction in genre is closely related to the thematic preoccupation with the concept of truth versus fiction. Tim O'Brien, the author of the novel, did indeed experience the Vietnam War, and he was likely influenced by his experiences as well as the experiences of his comrades when he collected the stories for his novel. Yet, the author Tim O'Brien cannot be considered to be one and the same as the character Tim O'Brien, and the novel cannot simply be considered a memoir.

In fact, *The Things They Carried* is as much a teaching resource for *how* to write a novel or story as it is a story about the Vietnam War. O'Brien suggests that blurring the line between fiction and truth, between memoir and novel, is essential, or inevitable, when writing a story. In the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," for example, O'Brien, the character—who is a writer in the context of the novel, just like author O'Brien—explains, "A true war story is never moral"; "in many cases a true war story cannot be believed."

Indeed, many of the chapter titles, including "How to Tell a True War Story," "Style," "Notes," and "Good Form" read like the chapter headings of a writing manual. In "Spin," O'Brien defines why people feel the need to write stories: "Stories are for joining the past to the future. 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." In other words, stories become the placeholders of time and the records of the human past.

In the case of writing war stories, the activity of writing also functions as a powerful catharsis for the writer and the subject. Norman Bowker's story in "Speaking of Courage," for example, allows O'Brien to resurrect the memory of his comrade and lend him a voice to express his recollections when, in reality, nobody was willing to listen to Bowker's stories, and he committed suicide in 1978. O'Brien explains:

Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done.

DISCUSSION TOPICS/QUESTIONS

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?

Practice Free Response Questions

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 1:

Read chapter 1, “The Things They Carried,” and write a well-organized essay in which you describe the multiple levels of ambiguity associated with the term “carry” throughout the chapter and analyze how the term and its multiple meanings help the narrator successfully introduce the subject and themes of the novel. Be sure to ground all your assertions firmly in the text.

Do not merely summarize the chapter.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 2:

Study the chapter entitled “Spin” and compose a coherent, well-written essay in which you demonstrate how the chapter illustrates and models O’Brien’s understanding of the craft of writing. Be sure to pay attention to details, paragraph structure, and statements on writing.

Do not merely summarize the passage.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 3:

Study part of the chapter entitled “On the Rainy River” starting with, “Looking back after twenty years...,” through the end of the chapter. Write a well-written essay in which you analyze the narrator’s motivations for wanting to escape the draft and his motivations for ultimately joining the war.

Do not merely summarize the passage.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 4:

Carefully review the buffalo incident in the chapter “How to Tell a True War Story” starting with, “This one does it for me,” and ending “every sin’s real fresh and original.” Analyze how the story of the baby buffalo contributes to O’Brien’s explanation of “how to tell a true war story.” Consider the differentiation between truth and fiction and the fact that, according to O’Brien, the buffalo incident probably never happened.

Do not merely summarize the passage.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 5:

Study the chapter entitled “the Dentist” and write a coherent essay in which you discuss the interpersonal relationships between the soldiers. Consider what motivated Curt Lemon to have his tooth pulled, and outline how his decision helps illustrate the forces that influence the bond between the soldiers.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 6:

A common theme of war literature is the difficulties one faces reconciling one’s war experiences with the life a soldier has left behind and will return to again. Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the disconnect soldiers experienced when moving between their life on the frontlines and their life at home before or after the war as illustrated in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 7:

Authors frequently employ specific narrative elements in order to shape their ideas and give form to their work overall. Consider how Tim O’Brien uses point of view deliberately in order to advance the themes that are prevalent within *The Things They Carried*. How, for example, do the choices in point of view contribute to the effective re-telling of the soldiers’ war experiences? You may focus, for example, on Kiowa’s death or Curt Lemon’s death. You may use other instances as well.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 8:

The genre of autobiographical fiction blurs the once-clear line between fact and story. Many writers and readers, however, find more “truth” in fiction than in a factual account of the same events. In a well-written essay, discuss the distinction between reality and fiction as explored by the author Tim O’Brien and the character/narrator Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*.

Avoid plot summary.

Practice Multiple Choice Questions

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 1-5:

Read the passage from the chapter entitled “On the Rainy River,” starting, “For ten or fifteen minutes Elroy held a course upstream...,” and ending, “I understood that I would not do what I should do.” Then choose the best answer to the multiple-choice questions that follow:

1. According to the narrator, Elroy Berdahl takes the narrator to the Canadian shore because he
 - (A) wanted to give him a quick and safe passage to Canada.
 - (B) believes escaping the draft is the right thing to do for O’Brien.
 - (C) wanted O’Brien to see the beauty of the United States from the distant water.
 - (D) was afraid O’Brien might steal his boat and cross into Canada on his own.
 - (E) wanted to give O’Brien a perspective from which to make a clear decision about which path to take in his life.
2. O’Brien describes the natural beauty of Canada, the “berries on the bushes,” in minute detail in order to
 - (A) show that O’Brien had a realistic opportunity to escape.
 - (B) illustrate the similarities between Canada and the United States.
 - (C) indicate that going to Canada is the right choice for O’Brien.
 - (D) indicate that going to Canada is not the right choice for O’Brien.
 - (E) demonstrate the stark difference between war and peace.
3. O’Brien demonstrates and models the traits of good story-telling he develops throughout the novel specifically when he
 - (A) tells the events leading to his decision in chronological order.
 - (B) illustrates his mastery of comparison and contrast when he talks about Canada and the United States.
 - (C) adheres to correct grammar usage and sentence structure.
 - (D) presents only events that are verifiable and true.
 - (E) addresses the reader in second person and invites the reader to “feel” what he was feeling.
4. O’Brien eventually cries in the boat because he
 - (A) is afraid of fighting in the war.
 - (B) fears what his family will go through when he goes to war.
 - (C) is too afraid to follow his conscience.
 - (D) cannot come to a decision.
 - (E) cannot reach the Canadian shore.
5. O’Brien’s tone in the passage can best be characterized as
 - (A) determined.
 - (B) frantic.
 - (C) angry.
 - (D) relieved.
 - (E) resigned.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 6-10:

Read the passage from the chapter entitled “How to Tell a True War Story” that begins, “How do you generalize?” and ends, “...but now is not.” Then choose the best answer to the multiple-choice questions that follow:

6. When O’Brien employs the literary device Antithesis several times in short succession in the first paragraph of this section, he indicates that
 - (A) war experiences are comprised of a multitude of contradictions.
 - (B) he is torn between his fear of war and his love for war.
 - (C) war is a confusing experience for O’Brien.
 - (D) he has changed his mind about the war since returning home and writing about his experiences as a soldier.
 - (E) the evilness of war should not be forgotten even in glorious moments.
7. The figurative devices used in this passage, such as the simile likening tracer rounds to “brilliant red ribbons” and the alliteration and metaphor in the phrase “harmonies of sounds and shape” enable the reader to
 - (A) get an accurate representation of what O’Brien actually saw and heard in combat.
 - (B) see, feel, hear, and experience what O’Brien experienced.
 - (C) understand that O’Brien wants to describe his experiences as unrealistic and dreamlike.
 - (D) understand that what O’Brien describes did not really happen and is not part of the “truth.”
 - (E) understand that O’Brien wanted to exaggerate as he was describing his experiences.
8. O’Brien likens war to “cancer under a microscope” in order to show that war
 - (A) will devastate the human body.
 - (B) brings many different diseases.
 - (C) is terrible, but also fascinating.
 - (D) is terribly destructive.
 - (E) changes the way soldiers feel.
9. O’Brien claims that “you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead” to show that
 - (A) near-death experiences in war also create a sense of being alive in the soldiers.
 - (B) near-death experiences bring vivid, negative recollections of what soldiers did wrong or didn’t accomplish in their lives.
 - (C) soldiers tend to cling to life when they have been injured.
 - (D) soldiers have illusions after or during near-death experiences and see things that are not real.
 - (E) death is a worthwhile sacrifice when it helps save the lives of others.
10. In this passage, O’Brien’s major claim with regard to writing is that
 - (A) writing about war is difficult.
 - (B) it is impossible to generalize about war.
 - (C) there is a certain beauty to war.
 - (D) the atrocities of war can never be adequately described.
 - (E) war stories never contain any truth.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 11-15:

Read the passage from the chapter entitled “The Man I Killed” that begins, “his jaw was in his throat” and ends, “Just go wherever the spirit takes you.” Then choose the best answer to the multiple-choice questions that follow:

11. O’Brien refers to the soldier he killed as “not a Communist,” “a citizen and a soldier” in order to
 - (A) tell the reader that the Vietnamese soldier was one of the few who were not Communist.
 - (B) show that it was difficult to differentiate between Vietnamese who fought on behalf of the Communists and those who fought on behalf of the West.
 - (C) humanize the Vietnamese soldier.
 - (D) indicate that the soldier was not a high government official.
 - (E) confess that he had killed the wrong man.

12. O’Brien is able to give details about the Vietnamese soldier’s childhood and background because he
 - (A) found information on the dead soldier’s body.
 - (B) later learned about him from another soldier.
 - (C) is familiar with Vietnamese culture and society.
 - (D) makes general assumptions about the typical young man in Vietnam.
 - (E) talked to him before he died.

13. Kiowa asks Azar to “go away” when he talks about the dead soldier because
 - (A) Kiowa does not like Azar.
 - (B) Azar is interfering with Kiowa’s work.
 - (C) Azar is speaking disrespectfully about the dead soldier.
 - (D) Azar had no responsibility in killing the soldier.
 - (E) Kiowa is grieving over the soldier’s death and wants to be alone.

14. As O’Brien describes the “man he killed,” he repeatedly uses the phrase “star-shaped hole” in order to
 - (A) romanticize the memory and image of the fallen soldier.
 - (B) accurately describe the dead soldier’s appearance.
 - (C) indicate how haunted he is by having caused the soldier’s death.
 - (D) show how Azar is ridiculing the soldier.
 - (E) explain what kinds of wounds the soldier suffered.

15. O’Brien’s mood throughout the passage can be characterized as
 - (A) elated and exhilarated.
 - (B) shocked and subdued.
 - (C) proud and patriotic.
 - (D) angry and resentful.
 - (E) eager and prepared.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 16-20:

Read the passage from the chapter entitled “Field Trip” that begins, “A few months after completing...” and ends, “That’s weird.” Then choose the best answer to the multiple-choice questions that follow.

16. O’Brien’s descriptions of the field where Kiowa died serve to illustrate all the following EXCEPT the fact that
- (A) the field where Kiowa died has dried up and turned into farm land.
 - (B) normal activities have resumed.
 - (C) the region is now marked by peace and quiet.
 - (D) the Vietnamese no longer appear as enemies.
 - (E) finding the exact site of Kiowa’s death will be impossible.
17. O’Brien returns to Vietnam with his daughter for all the following reasons EXCEPT
- (A) he gives the journey as a birthday present.
 - (B) he wants Kathleen to learn something about the history of her father.
 - (C) he wants Kathleen to see the cultural sights in Vietnam.
 - (D) he wants to return Kiowa’s moccasins.
 - (E) he hopes to justify to Kathleen his actions in the war.
18. Kathleen calls her father’s actions “weird” and “stupid” for all the following reasons EXCEPT
- (A) she is tired of her Vietnam journey.
 - (B) she does not comprehend the motivations for war.
 - (C) she is embarrassed by her father’s actions.
 - (D) she finds the smell of the field unpleasant.
 - (E) she does not understand why her father is still thinking about the war.
19. O’Brien’s tone throughout his descriptions and recollections in this passage can be characterized as
- (A) solemn and contemplative.
 - (B) eager and excited.
 - (C) fearful and cautious.
 - (D) overbearing and preachy.
 - (E) impatient and irritated.
20. O’Brien employs a simile in which he refers to “cavemen and dinosaurs” in order to
- (A) indicate that the war took place a very, very long time ago and feels like a very remote experience to him now.
 - (B) show what Kathleen’s interests are and how bored she is during her journey through Vietnam.
 - (C) illustrate that he does not recognize the field at all, that it seems foreign, remote, and exotic.
 - (D) show that war is an entirely foreign and strange concept to Kathleen.
 - (E) show that O’Brien now feels that his actions in the war were outdated, unjustified, and barbaric.

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS

With Explanations

1. According to the narrator, Elroy Berdahl takes the narrator to the Canadian shore because he
 - (A) wanted to give him a quick and safe passage to Canada.
Elroy already knows that O'Brien can get to Canada easily if he chooses to do so. He is more interested in giving him a chance to really consider all his options from "up close."
 - (B) believes escaping the draft is the right thing to do for O'Brien.
Elroy never voices his opinion about the war or the draft.
 - (C) wanted O'Brien to see the beauty of the United States from the distant water.
Elroy does not want to make a statement about either country. He is more interested in allowing O'Brien to weigh his options carefully.
 - (D) was afraid O'Brien might steal his boat and cross into Canada on his own.
Elroy seems unconcerned about O'Brien possibly stealing his boat.
 - (E) **wanted to give O'Brien a perspective from which to make a clear decision about which path to take in his life.**
Elroy, whom O'Brien calls his hero, wants to give O'Brien an opportunity to see himself at the threshold of his choices. He wants O'Brien to make a clear decision about his future by seeing both options up close.

2. O'Brien describes the natural beauty of Canada, the "berries on the bushes," in minute detail in order to
 - (A) **show that O'Brien had a realistic opportunity to escape.**
O'Brien describes the close-up details of Canadian nature to show just how close he was to the shore and how easy it would have been to escape.
 - (B) illustrate the similarities between Canada and the United States.
O'Brien does not use comparison in this section.
 - (C) indicate that going to Canada is the right choice for O'Brien.
He does not know what the right choice is. He is struggling to come to terms with his decision.
 - (D) indicate that going to Canada is not the right choice for O'Brien.
He does not know what the right choice is. He is struggling to come to terms with his decision.
 - (E) demonstrate the stark difference between war and peace.
O'Brien has not yet experienced war, so there can be no comparison.

3. O'Brien demonstrates and models the traits of good story-telling he develops throughout the novel specifically when he
- (A) tells the events leading to his decision in chronological order. Because this passage is taken from a memoir of sorts, O'Brien has not followed a strict chronological order.
 - (B) illustrates his mastery of comparison and contrast when he talks about Canada and the United States. This answer is really quite vague and does not address what one would consider "story-telling."
 - (C) adheres to correct grammar usage and sentence structure. These are certainly not necessary for good story-telling
 - (D) presents only events that are verifiable and true. These are likewise not necessary for good story-telling.
 - (E) **addresses the reader in second person and invites the reader to "feel" what he was feeling. Many students are taught to avoid second person in their own writing because of the intimacy it creates between writer and reader. But O'Brien specifically *wants* that intimacy, so he cautiously violates this "rule."**
4. O'Brien eventually cries in the boat because he
- (A) is afraid of fighting in the war.
He may be afraid of fighting, but that is not why he is crying in the boat.
 - (B) fears for his family and what they will go through when he goes to war.
He certainly fears for his family, but he cries because of his inability to make the morally correct choice.
 - (C) **cannot come to a decision.**
O' Brien cries because he cannot obey his own conscience. He knows it would be the right thing to do to refuse the draft, but he is too embarrassed to do so.
 - (D) cannot come to a decision.
He eventually does come to a decision, but he is not happy with his decision.
 - (E) cannot reach the Canadian shore.
He is very close to the Canadian shore and could reach it easily.
5. O'Brien's tone in the passage can best be characterized as
- (A) determined.
He is not determined at all; he is insecure and resigned to his fate.
 - (B) frantic.
He is resigned and sad.
 - (C) angry.
He is not openly angry, but rather embarrassed and resigned.
 - (D) relieved.
Although he has come to a decision, he is not relieved.
 - (E) **resigned.**
He is resigned because he knows that the decision he has come to is not the morally correct choice.

6. When O'Brien employs the literary device Antithesis several times in short succession in the first paragraph of this section, he indicates that
- (A) war experiences are comprised of a multitude of contradictions.
 - (B) he is torn between his fear of war and his love for war.
 - (C) war is a confusing experience for O'Brien.
 - (D) he has changed his mind about the war since returning home and writing about his experiences as a soldier.
 - (E) the evilness of war should not be forgotten even in glorious moments.

O'Brien uses Antithesis to show that war involves a series of seemingly irreconcilable, yet coexisting experiences. It is not only terrible, but also beautiful. (A). While O'Brien indicates that he hates and loves war, he is not torn between the two emotions. Instead, he indicates that both emotions and multiple experiences always exist simultaneously (B). While war is clearly confusing (C), the antithesis and central claim of this passage hinges upon the recognition that war is multi-dimensional – it can be confusing and not confusing at the same time. O'Brien recognizes that the experience of a moment always changes from one second to the next. He does not consider his retrospective reminiscences to be any more valuable or accurate than his original experiences as a soldier (D). While O'Brien often considers war to be a terrible reality, in this passage, he acknowledges that there is a majestic and beautiful side to war as well (E).

7. The figurative devices used in this passage, such as the simile likening tracer rounds to “brilliant red ribbons” and the alliteration and metaphor in the phrase “harmonies of sounds and shape” enable the reader to
- (A) get an accurate representation of what O'Brien actually saw and heard in combat.
 - (B) see, feel, hear, and experience what O'Brien experienced.
 - (C) understand that O'Brien wants to describe his experiences as unrealistic and dreamlike.
 - (D) understand that what O'Brien describes did not really happen and is not part of the “truth.”
 - (E) understand that O'Brien wanted to exaggerate as he was describing his experiences.

Writers do not use images to create factually accurate descriptions (A), but rather to enable readers to experience what they experienced by incorporating references to sensory perception, such as visual images and references to auditory perception (B). While O'Brien contends that his experiences are contradictory, he does not say that any of the experiences he describes are unrealistic. Instead, he insists that each experience is real in its own way (C). In fact, O'Brien believes that using images often helps to represent an experience better than pure “facts” (D). O'Brien's descriptions may stray from the “facts,” but he does not need to use exaggeration. He merely wants to help his reader experience what he saw, felt, and heard (E).

8. O'Brien likens war to "cancer under a microscope" in order to show that war
- (A) will devastate the human body.
Although war is devastating, the comparison is aimed at demonstrating the complex dual nature of war.
 - (B) brings many different diseases.
Although war usually brings diseases, the comparison is aimed at demonstrating the complex dual nature of war.
 - (C) is terrible, but also fascinating.
War is terrible, but it can also be beautiful and fascinating when seen from different perspectives.
 - (D) is terribly destructive and dangerous.
War is dangerous and destructive, but it is also beautiful and fascinating.
 - (E) changes the way soldiers feel about health and disease.
The comparison does not refer to the soldiers' perception of the war.
9. O'Brien claims that "you're never more alive than when you're almost dead" to show that
- (A) **near-death experiences in war also create a sense of being alive in the soldiers. O'Brien explains that, following a near-death experience, soldiers immediately recognize the beauty of the world around them. They become more aware of the trees and soil and air and the life that is all around them in nature.**
 - (B) near-death experiences bring vivid, negative recollections of what soldiers did wrong or didn't accomplish in their lives.
O'Brien does not associate near-death experiences with negative recollections. Instead, he indicates that near-death experiences can help bring about positive recollections and hopeful goals and plans for the future.
 - (C) soldiers tend to cling to life when they have been injured.
While many soldiers likely fight for their lives when faced with serious injury, O'Brien, here, refers to the eerie feeling experienced by soldiers that allows them to experience the world around them and their own bodies more intensively. And deliberately.
 - (D) soldiers have illusions after or during near-death experiences and see things that are not real.
Near-death experiences, on the contrary, remind the soldiers of the real beauty and wonder of life. They allow them to see themselves and the world around them very clearly.
 - (E) death is a worthwhile sacrifice when it helps save the lives of others.
To many soldiers, death is inevitably an acceptable sacrifice when it can help save the lives of others. However, O'Brien, here, is talking about near-death experiences and how they affect the soldiers who are experiencing them.

10. In this passage, O'Brien's major claim with regard to writing is that
- (A) writing about war is difficult.
Writing about war may be difficult, but the major claim of the passage has to do with generalizing about war.
 - (B) **it is impossible to generalize about war.**
O'Brien indicates that it is impossible to say anything general about war, or even peace. Everything depends on perspective.
 - (C) there is a certain beauty to war that cannot be described.
O'Brien indicates that there is a beauty to war, but the passage focuses on the fact that war cannot be generalized.
 - (D) the atrocities of war can never be adequately described.
The atrocities of war can be described, but you cannot make a general statement about war.
 - (E) war stories never contain any truth.
War stories contain many truths, depending on perspective.
11. O'Brien refers to the soldier he killed as "not a Communist," "a citizen and a soldier" in order to
- (A) tell the reader that the Vietnamese soldier was one of the few who were not Communist.
O'Brien is not concerned with the soldier's political affiliation. He simply wants to show him as a human being.
 - (B) show that it was difficult to differentiate between Vietnamese who fought on behalf of the Communists and those who fought on behalf of the West.
O'Brien is not concerned with the soldier's political affiliation. He simply wants to show him as a human being.
 - (C) **humanize the Vietnamese soldier.**
O'Brien wants to humanize the soldier and show that he is not an anonymous Communist, but a person, an individual, and a citizen.
 - (D) indicate that the soldier was not a high government official.
 - (E) confess that he had killed the wrong man.
12. O'Brien is able to give details about the Vietnamese soldier's childhood and background because he
- (A) found information on the dead soldier's body.
He did not find any papers.
 - (B) later learned from another soldier about him.
There is no indication that he learned any facts about the soldier.
 - (C) is very familiar with Vietnamese culture and society.
He is not interested in discussing Vietnamese culture in this context.
 - (D) **makes general assumptions about the typical young man in Vietnam.**
He wants to show that the soldier is a human being who probably led a typical life. He invents details to lend a sense of individuality and humanity to the dead soldier.
 - (E) talked to him before he died.
He never talked to the soldier.

13. Kiowa asks Azar to “go away” when he talks about the dead soldier because
- (A) Kiowa does not like Azar.
There is no indication that Kiowa does not like Azar.
 - (B) Azar is interfering with Kiowa’s work.
Kiowa does not have any work to do. He simply does not like the disrespectful manner in which Azar talks.
 - (C) **Azar is speaking disrespectfully about the dead soldier. Kiowa believes it is wrong to use profanity when talking about a dead soldier. He considers it disrespectful.**
 - (D) Azar had no responsibility in killing the soldier.
It is irrelevant in this context whether or not Azar played a role in the soldier’s death.
 - (E) Kiowa is grieving over the soldier’s death and wants to be alone.
Kiowa does not like the disrespectful manner in which Azar talks about the dead soldier.
14. As O’Brien describes the “man he killed,” he repeatedly uses the phrase “star-shaped hole” in order to
- (A) romanticize the memory and image of the fallen soldier.
O’Brien is not ready to evaluate his actions, and thus, he is not in a position to romanticize the memory of the soldier. The event is too recent, too fresh in his memory, since the dead soldier is still right before his eyes.
 - (B) accurately describe the dead soldier’s appearance.
O’Brien is not interested in giving an accurate description of what the dead soldier looked like. Instead, he wants to show the reader what impression the sight of the dead soldier made on him. He wants to show his disbelief and shock over the soldier’s death.
 - (C) **indicate how haunted he is by having caused the soldier’s death. O’Brien repeats the phrase “star-shaped hole” because he is in a state of disbelief at his own actions. The mutilation visible in the soldier’s face haunts him, because it drives home the viciousness of his act and the reality of death.**
 - (D) show how Azar is ridiculing the soldier.
O’Brien and Kiowa distance themselves from Azar’s disrespectful banter. O’Brien’s reminiscences of the soldier’s experience are internal and only shared with the reader through a third-person narrator.
 - (E) explain what kinds of wounds the soldier suffered.
O’Brien is not interested in dissecting the specific type of wound the soldier may have suffered. He repeats the phrase in order to attempt to come to terms with his actions. He clearly is still in a state of shock when he sees the mutilated appearance of the soldier who is dead at his own hand.

15. O'Brien's mood throughout the passage can be characterized as
- (A) elated and exhilarated.
O'Brien is very quiet and calm throughout this passage. In fact, he ponders his deed of murder somberly and has difficulty coming to terms with his actions.
- (B) **shocked and subdued.**
Kiowa repeatedly approaches O'Brien, attempting to rouse him from his somber mood; but O'Brien is in such a state of shock and can barely respond to Kiowa. He is unable to divert his eyes from the sight of the dead soldier, and he continues to stare at the deceased man in disbelief.
- (C) proud and patriotic.
While O'Brien is still in a state of shock, he is unable to ponder whether his deed was necessary or patriotic. He cannot view the soldier's death as a casualty of war. He only sees the soldier as a fellow human being who has been killed at his hands.
- (D) angry and resentful.
O'Brien has not yet processed the death of the soldier. He is simply staring at the soldier without being able to evaluate his actions at this point.
- (E) eager and prepared.
Kiowa repeatedly attempts to get O'Brien to move and leave the scene of the soldier's death, but O'Brien is stuck in the moment, unable to communicate or move forward.
16. O'Brien's descriptions of the field where Kiowa died serve to illustrate all the following EXCEPT the fact that
- (A) the field where Kiowa died has dried up and turned into farmland.
O'Brien explains that the field is now a grassy field, almost "bone dry." Two farmers are working the land as O'Brien and his daughter are paying their visit.
- (B) normal activities have resumed.
The two farmers twice alluded to in the passage illustrate that a sense of normalcy has returned to the area where Kiowa died and to the country of Vietnam.
- (C) the region is now marked by peace and quiet.
The descriptions clearly illustrate a sense of peace and quiet. O'Brien is describing "yellow butterflies," "a breeze," and "wide blue sky," conveying a sense of calm and serenity.
- (D) the Vietnamese no longer appear as enemies.
O'Brien describes two farmers who are quietly working away as he pays his visit. The two farmers are working the field. They are no longer enemies.
- (E) **finding the exact site of Kiowa's death will be impossible.**
While the field has drastically changed, O'Brien is able to locate the spot where Mitchell Sanders found Kiowa's rucksack. This is the spot where Kiowa was last seen and must have died.

17. O'Brien returns to Vietnam with his daughter for all the following reasons EXCEPT
- (A) he gives the journey as a birthday present.
O'Brien considers the journey "a kind of birthday present." He thinks his daughter is now old enough to benefit from such a trip.
 - (B) he wants Kathleen to learn something about the history of her father.
O'Brien feels that Kathleen has always asked a lot of questions about why her father was involved in the war and why he is still obsessed with his war stories. He hopes this journey can help answer some of those questions.
 - (C) he wants Kathleen to see the cultural sights in Vietnam.
O'Brien takes Kathleen to Saigon and Hanoi and to many other sights.
 - (D) he wants to return Kiowa's moccasins.
In order to make peace with his own role in the war, O'Brien wants to return Kiowa's moccasins to the place where he died.
 - (E) **he hopes to justify to Kathleen his actions in the war.**
O'Brien hopes that Kathleen will understand him and his past a little better, but he is not interested in justifying any of his past actions. He wants his daughter to understand that war has marked him for life, and that this is why he is still obsessed with his war stories.
18. Kathleen calls her father's actions "weird" and "stupid" for all the following reasons EXCEPT
- (A) **she is tired of her Vietnam journey.**
Though Kathleen may not be keenly interested in exploring Vietnam, "she'd held up well" according to her father and even became friends with the translator.
 - (B) she does not comprehend the motivations for war.
Kathleen is unable to understand why two countries can be so much at odds with one another that war is the only answer for resolving conflict. She does not understand why her father had to fight in Vietnam.
 - (C) she is embarrassed by her father's actions.
When Kathleen sees her father strip down to his underwear to return Kiowa's moccasins, she is embarrassed by her father's actions, which seem unreasonable and unnecessary to her.
 - (D) she finds the smell of the field unpleasant.
Kathleen "pinche[s] her nose" when she realizes the foul smell emanating from the field, and she finds it foolish of her father to get close to the bad smell.
 - (E) she does not understand why her father is still thinking about the war.
Kathleen finds it puzzling that her father still thinks about "dumb things" that happened so long ago. She feels her dad is obsessed with war memories.

19. O'Brien's tone throughout his descriptions and recollections in this passage can be characterized as
- (A) solemn and contemplative.
O'Brien is quietly recollecting Kiowa's death and his time as a soldier. He seeks "signs of forgiveness" and "personal grace."
- (B) eager and excited.
While O'Brien is indeed eager to return Kiowa's moccasins, the tone of the entire passage is marked by descriptions of a calm and quiet nature. O'Brien's word choices, such as "birds and butterflies" and "soft rustlings of rural," enhance the quiet mood of the passage.
- (C) fearful and cautious.
O'Brien immediately encounters a sense of peace and quiet as he approaches the area where Kiowa died. He observes two farmers and acknowledges the fact that the Vietnamese are no longer enemies. Consequently, there is no reason for fear or caution. The entire passage employs a calm and peaceful tone.
- (D) overbearing and preachy.
O'Brien does not force any of his recollections on Kathleen. He quietly marvels at the transformation of the field and quietly ponders the contrast between the past and present.
- (E) impatient and irritated.
While Kathleen is slowly growing impatient since she does not understand why she has to spend so much time at this particular site in Vietnam, O'Brien knows he must take his time to honor the memory of Kiowa.
20. O'Brien employs a simile in which he refers to "cavemen and dinosaurs" in order to
- (A) indicate that the war took place a very, very long time ago and feels like a very remote experience to him now.
O'Brien still feels very connected to the war. He continuously reminisces about his experiences.
- (B) show what Kathleen's interests are and how bored she is during her journey through Vietnam.
O'Brien makes no reference to Kathleen's interests. The simile serves to illustrate her unfamiliarity with war and the war experience.
- (C) illustrate that he does not recognize the field at all, that it seems foreign, remote, and exotic.
While O'Brien acknowledges that the field has dramatically changed from a terrifying mud field to a peaceful place of farming, he recognizes the site immediately. He still senses the foul smell and can easily locate the site of Kiowa's death.
- (D) show that war is an entirely foreign and strange concept to Kathleen.
The simile serves to show that Kathleen is entirely unfamiliar with the concept of war. It is an idea that is as remote to her understanding and familiar world as dinosaurs and cavemen.
- (E) show that O'Brien now feels that his actions in the war were outdated, unjustified, and barbaric.
O'Brien does not evaluate his past actions in this passage. He merely wants to honor the memory of his fallen comrades.

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?

Tim O'Brien begins his novel by listing a series of items the soldiers carried on their tours in Vietnam. He offers insights into the literal weight each soldier had to carry and the items that were important to each individual. Moreover, O'Brien conveys the idea that many of the items carried by soldiers contained meaning beyond their immediate use. Many items served as reminders of the world and the loved ones left behind. O'Brien utilizes the metaphorical meaning of “to carry” when he describes some of the psychological burdens the soldiers have to deal with. Fear and guilt, and the ghosts of the soldiers who have died are essential features of the themes in O'Brien's novel.

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

Jimmy Cross carries a picture of a girl he knew in college. He also carries a number of letters written to him by Martha. Although he well knows that Martha has no romantic interest in him, he clings to these items as a reminder of a better life that he hopes to return to. Martha, to him, represents a sense of normalcy. It becomes clear that Jimmy Cross is a man who needs reassurance of his own humanity. He does not want to lose touch with the world he left behind before coming to Vietnam.

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

The phrase reveals that many of the soldiers cannot find a meaningful purpose in the day-to-day fighting. They do not know why they are in Vietnam, and they cannot understand why it is important to fight this war. They feel as if their missions are pointless, yet they have to obey their commanders and fulfill their military obligations.

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

Kiowa is trying hard to find a sense of sadness within him. He sees how Jimmy Cross is affected by Lavender's death, but he simply cannot pretend to feel any real emotions. Instead, he has to admit that he is simply glad that he can rest.

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

Many of the soldiers are fighting in this war not because they are convinced it is the right thing to do, but because they were too ashamed to follow their conscience and disobey the orders of their superiors or government. Many simply couldn't disappoint their parents and stand up for what they thought was morally right. So, they joined the war out of shame and embarrassment. Consequently, they feel a sense of guilt at the suffering and death of their fellow soldiers. They know that their mere presence in the war makes them participants in the death of other individuals.

“Love”

1. How does the narrative viewpoint change at the onset of this chapter?

While the previous chapter was narrated from a third-person point of view, the chapter entitled “Love” opens by telling the events from the perspective of a first-person narrator. The narrative also shifts from the time of the Vietnam War to the present day.

2. Why has Jimmy Cross never forgiven himself for Lavender's death?

Jimmy Cross still believes that it was his preoccupation with Martha that caused him not to pay attention to what was happening on the battlefield. He therefore believes that his failure to pay attention resulted in Lavender's death.

3. What request does Jimmy Cross express as he is leaving O'Brien's home? What does his request reveal about his character?

Jimmy Cross asks O'Brien to “make [him] out to be a good guy” in the story O'Brien promises to write about him and the War. His request reveals that Cross has not quite come to terms with the role he played in the Vietnam War. He still carries his insecurities and is not self-confident. He even claims he still loves Martha.

“Spin”

1. Why did O'Brien and the other soldiers enjoy watching Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins play checkers?

O'Brien describes the game as a predictable activity, with clear rules. The “enemies” in the game are easily visible: you are either black or red. Unlike fighting in the Vietnam War, the game is orderly and “reassuring.”

2. Why does O'Brien present the ideas in this chapter in separate, almost disconnected and fragmented sections?

O'Brien presents his recollections of the war in fragments in this chapter, because the events he and his fellow soldiers experienced are not clear-cut, chronological, or clearly related. Every story can be told from a different perspective and will, thus, gain new meaning. O'Brien does not experience the war as a coherent, chronological series of events, but, rather, as a loose collection of fragmented memories.

“On the Rainy River”

1. What is O'Brien suggesting when he describes himself as having had “a modest stand against the war”?

O'Brien is suggesting that, as an individual, he had no strong conviction to either fight or to resist.

2. How is his ambivalence intensified after he receives his draft notice?

After he receives his draft notice and realizes he does not really want to go, he finds he cannot justify his decision. Even though he is modestly opposed to this war, he admits that he is not opposed to war in general.

3. What does O'Brien mean when he says he “was too good for this war”?

O'Brien explains that he was in a completely different mindset before the war started: he was a student, focused on his studies, and he had a bright career as a scholar ahead of him. He had an image of a soldier that resembled a boy scout. He did not feel as if he fit the definition of soldier.

4. What is ironic about the feeling of isolation O'Brien experiences the summer of his draft notice?

On the one hand, O'Brien claims he feels alone and isolated in making a difficult decision, yet, on the other hand, he makes it clear that just about every young man who received a draft notice faced the same decision and the same sense of isolation.

5. How does O'Brien develop the theme of shame in the chapter?

O'Brien discusses his objections to the war and his desire to escape the draft and cross into Canada. However, as O'Brien ponders his options, he is faced with the potential consequences that would accompany his refusal to join the War. He considers the reaction of his parents and fellow citizens, and he feels embarrassed when he considers how disappointed they would be if he went to Canada. O'Brien develops the theme of shame by outlining his inner struggle: when he finally comes to a decision about joining the War, he is ashamed again, because he knows he is betraying his moral judgment.

6. What is the effect of O'Brien's directly addressing the reader at the end of this chapter?

The direct address, and the questions, "What would you do?" and "Would you cry, as I did?" shock the reader and force us to either condemn or sympathize with O'Brien.

"Enemies"

1. Why does Jensen claim that there are "enemies everywhere"?

Dave Jensen got into a fight with Lee Strunk over a missing jackknife. When the fight escalates, Dave Jensen becomes paranoid and fears for his life, even among his comrades.

2. How does Dave Jensen's reaction exemplify the fragile psychology of Vietnam soldiers?

Dave Jensen's reaction illustrates how easy it was for soldiers to experience a sense of loss and disorientation while in Vietnam. Since they didn't know why they were there in the first place and what exactly they were fighting for, many soldiers were unable to distinguish between who was an enemy and who wasn't. Jensen's reaction also shows how psychologically demanding life in Vietnam was for the soldiers in the platoon.

"Friends"

1. Why has O'Brien placed this chapter immediately after the previous chapter "Enemies"? What is the connection between the chapters?

In this chapter, O'Brien describes how former enemies Jensen and Strunk become friends soon after the altercation described in the previous chapter. Clearly, O'Brien intends to illustrate that nothing is absolute in the War. Situations, relationships, anything can change quickly. Life at the front line is unpredictable.

2. What does the arrangement between Strunk and Jensen reveal about the soldiers in the platoon? What does the fact that Strunk begs Jensen not to fulfill his part of the agreement reveal about Jensen? About soldiers in general?

The arrangement illustrates how much the soldiers feared being incapacitated. It also reveals the soldiers' desire never to jeopardize or lose their masculinity. When Strunk asks Jensen to break the deal, it becomes clear that he entered into the agreement without ever envisioning the consequences. Now that he is injured, he clings to life at all cost.

3. Why do Strunk and Jensen enter into their pact in the first place? Why does Strunk want to rescind the pact when he is injured?

While they are both frightened but healthy, both Strunk and Jensen view death and injury as abstract concepts. In the abstract, death seems preferable to a handicapped life. Once injured, however, Strunk is able to see the difference between the abstract notion and the reality. Life is better.

4. Why is Jensen "relieved" to hear that Strunk has died?

Jensen still has the abstract view that death is preferable to a handicapped life. He is relieved to know that Strunk will not have to face the rest of his life damaged.

"How to Tell a True War Story"

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

O'Brien starts his chapter with the claim, "This is true." He then recounts a series of episodes from the Vietnam War. Throughout the chapter, O'Brien continues to re-define his notion of "truth." He explains that a true war story always contains elements of make-believe. According to O'Brien, it is not important to tell the facts. Instead, he strives to allow a reader to experience exactly what the writer was experiencing through deliberate choice of words and details. The distinction between truth and fiction, then, quickly becomes blurred.

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

As in most of the other chapters, O'Brien has explored the fact that, in war, old notions of morality and immorality do not hold. If someone tries to attach a moral to a war story, he or she is probably altering the truth of the story.

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

The reconstruction of Lemon's experience gets at the nature of truth. The truth of the matter is that Lemon stepped on a live mortar. The blast lifted him from the earth and threw him into a tree. O'Brien speculates, however, that, to Lemon, it must have seemed as if he was being levitated by the sunlight, and that the sunlight was killing him. That was Lemon's "truth."

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

O'Brien uses profane language to indicate how young, innocent, inexperienced soldiers can become affected by the events of the War. For example, when a young soldier doesn't receive a response to a letter he sends, he reacts with profanity in order to downplay his own disappointment. Many of the younger soldiers use profane language to appear more powerful, cool, and tough.

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

Every soldier has his own experience of war. In that way, many events can change when viewed from a variety of angles. Moreover, war is not always terrible. Sometimes, says O'Brien, war can be beautiful and fascinating. It is impossible to make general, dogmatic statements about war.

"The Dentist"

1. Why does O'Brien feel the need to tell the story of Curt Lemon and the dentist?

When Curt Lemon died, O'Brien "found it hard to mourn." He explains that he was never quite close to Lemon. The story of Curt Lemon and the dentist allows him to honor Lemon by bringing him to life on the page and allowing readers to get a brief insight into what Curt Lemon was like as a human being.

2. What is ironic about Lemon's incident with the dentist? Would the irony have been as strong if O'Brien had placed this anecdote *before* the chapter describing Lemon's death?

The irony here is that Lemon was so frightened of dentists—where there was no real danger—that he fainted. Yet he felt himself to be in no danger only seconds before his death. Lemon's having his tooth extracted is intended to show the young man's bravery, but there was no bravery needed for Lemon to face the death he experienced.

This irony would have been all but lost had O'Brien put this anecdote before Lemon's death. The source of the irony is in our knowing how Lemon died. Thus, his shame and his show of bravado seem all the more sad in the context of his death.

3. Why does Curt Lemon ask the dentist to pull his healthy tooth? How does his request illustrate the theme of shame?

Ashamed of how he reacted to his fear of dentists, Lemon somehow thinks having the dentist pull a tooth will show bravery.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

1. What is Rat Kiley’s typical way of telling a story?

Rat Kiley has a tendency to embellish his stories. He usually exaggerates in order to make his reader “feel exactly what he felt.”

2. What is the significance of Mary Anne’s transformation? What does it say about Mark Fossie and the other soldiers?

Mary Anne’s transformation is the complete opposite of the soldiers’ response to being in Vietnam. The soldiers are, at best, indifferent to Vietnamese culture. At worst, they hate it. For the soldiers, their time in Vietnam is a disruption of their lives to which they intend to return. To Mary Anne, however, Vietnam offers the opportunity for an entire new life.

3. Why does O’Brien allow the story of Mary Anne to be told by a man who is known for his exaggeration and admits that he only heard this story second- or third-hand?

From the beginning, O’Brien does not want the reader to get caught up in whether this story is factually true. The differences between Fossie’s and Mary Anne’s reactions to Vietnam are metaphorically true. Factual truth is unimportant.

“Stockings”

1. Thematically, why does O’Brien place this chapter immediately after the previous one?

The two chapters are thematically opposite one another. In the previous chapter, Mark Fossie brings his girlfriend to Vietnam, hoping for her to comfort him in the war. In this chapter, the girlfriend stays home, but provides the comfort lacking in the previous chapter.

The previous chapter challenged the traditional male/female roles in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, while this chapter reinforces those roles.

2. How does the notion of superstition mirror what O’Brien has been proposing as his notion of truth?

On a rational level, Dobbins knows that his girlfriend’s stockings can do nothing to protect him, but he continues to wear them—even after the girlfriend breaks up with him. The comfort and protection Dobbins feels are real, even if their source is not true. The soldiers’ superstitious beliefs, then, while not literally or factually true, are certainly real.

“Church”

1. Why does Kiowa come to believe that it is wrong to set up camp in the church?

Kiowa comes to understand that the monks have been extremely respectful to the American soldiers. The Americans, on the other hand, have put little thought into respecting the spiritual place they have entered. They have brought their weapons and simply camped in the church.

“The Man I Killed”

1. Why does O’Brien emphasize that the man he killed was not a Communist but “a citizen and a soldier”?

O’Brien is appalled by his own actions. He comes to realize that the man he killed is not merely an anonymous Communist who must be eradicated, but a human being in his own right. He calls him a “citizen and a soldier” to restore a sense of humanity to the dead Vietnamese soldier.

2. Why does Kiowa send Azar away?

Kiowa cannot stand Azar’s disrespectful and profane manner of talking about the dead Vietnamese soldier. Moreover, he sees how much O’Brien is suffering after realizing that he has killed a man. He wants to give O’Brien some space to come to terms with his deed.

3. Why does O’Brien explain that the dead Vietnamese soldier was “afraid of disgracing himself . . . his family and village”?

When O’Brien invents a series of details about the dead Vietnamese soldier’s childhood, it becomes clear that he does so in order to show the similarities between himself and the dead soldier. O’Brien envisions that, just like he himself, the dead soldier did not want to join the war but did it out of fear and embarrassment.

“Ambush”

1. How does the narrative technique, the way the paragraphs are structured in this chapter, contribute to the themes of the novel?

Almost the entire chapter is a retelling of the killing of the Vietnamese soldier readers already met in the previous chapter. This time, however, the soldier's death is told in a different manner. O'Brien uses very long paragraphs, almost stream-of-consciousness style, in order to describe what he saw when the soldier came out of the mist. He doesn't dwell on personal details, as in the previous chapter, but, instead, presents the events by talking about exactly what he saw that day when he killed the man. The technique of using long, paragraphs of stream-of-consciousness allows O'Brien to show how easy it is to dissociate yourself from the enemy by simply viewing him as a threat who emerges out of the mist.

“Style”

1. What kind of literary device does the narrator use several times throughout this short chapter to describe the scene in the village where the young girl is dancing? What effect is created with this device?

The narrator uses similes to offer a vivid image of the scene in the village. He claims that the “hooches smelled like hay” and the smoke rose in “ripples like fog.” If the narrator is able to convey a visual image of the village scene, he is forcing the reader to recognize the girl and her dead family as fellow human beings, not merely enemies.

“Speaking of Courage”

1. What point of view is used to convey the events in “Speaking of Courage”?

The story is told from a third-person perspective. The third-person narrator tells the events from the point of view of Norman Bowker.

2. What are the levels of “courage” to which the title of this vignette refers?

There are several. First, there is the courage Bowker presumably displayed at the various times when he earned his seven medals—a source of pride to his family. Then there is the quiet courage that Bowker displays while driving around the lake, wanting to unburden his soul, having no one to talk to, and not wanting to disillusion his father. Finally, there is both the courage Bowker displayed, and his sense of having acted cowardly, in the field when he tried to save Kiwoa's life before finally deciding to save his own.

3. How does Norman Bowker experience his hometown after returning to it after the end of the War?

Norman Bowker feels completely disconnected from the place of his childhood and youth. He recognizes the town, the lake, the people, but he feels as if they cannot understand him any longer. Particularly, Bowker is distressed about the fact that he has nobody in his life who is willing to listen to his stories. He is overwhelmed by a sense of isolation.

4. How is the 4th of July display described in the chapter an instance of irony?

The descriptions of the 4th of July celebrations function as an instance of irony because they show that Americans who have never been to war focus only on the superficial aspects of the celebration. A real war hero, Norman Bowker, is looking for anyone who will listen to his story. Yet, the citizens of this town ignore the needs of the soldier and focus on the artificial trappings of the 4th of July celebrations.

“Notes”

1. How does this chapter build on the previous chapter’s theme of isolation and alienation?

In this chapter, O’Brien explains that Norman Bowker ended up taking his own life. O’Brien includes fragments from Bowker’s letters and explains that he completely revised the chapter “Speaking of Courage” in Bowker’s honor after his death. He wanted to give Bowker a chance to finally be heard. Having someone who would listen to his stories was the one thing Bowker couldn’t find after returning from the war.

2. How does the chapter contribute to the theme of guilt?

After hearing about Norman Bowker’s death, Tim O’Brien is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. While he himself easily readjusted to life at home after returning from Vietnam, many of his fellow soldiers, like Norman Bowker, were never able to successfully reenter society.

“In the Field”

1. Who is the predominant narrator in this chapter?

For the most part, the chapter is told from a third-person viewpoint from the perspective of Lt. Jimmy Cross.

2. What is Azar’s coping mechanism for dealing with death?

Whenever he is faced with death, Azar resorts to using profane language. When Kiowa dies in the mud, he delves deep into profanities to hide his own grief and insecurities.

3. What is the significance of the metaphor O'Brien uses to describe Jimmy Cross's reaction to seeing his soldiers search for Kiowa's body?

O'Brien uses a metaphor in order to describe the emotions Jimmy Cross is experiencing as he is watching his men look for Kiowa's body. Jimmy Cross compares the sight of his soldiers scouring the mud field for a body to the search for a lost golf ball. On the one hand, the metaphor is probably a fairly good literal description of the men's postures and actions as they comb the field for Kiowa's body. On the other hand, however, it is grotesquely ironic that O'Brien would be able to compare the search for the body of a fallen comrade with something so trivial.

4. How does the chapter develop the themes of guilt and blame?

Throughout the chapter, numerous characters experience a sense of guilt with regard to Kiowa's death. They blame themselves for losing a fellow soldier. Jimmy Cross, for example, believes that his failure to move his platoon to dry ground may have contributed to Kiowa's death. Another soldier believes he caused Kiowa's death because he was turning on a flashlight in order to show a picture to Kiowa. He believes the light attracted enemy fire. In the end, the chapter complicates the idea of guilt and blame by suggesting that everyone and everything—soldiers, voters, policy makers, the climate, the weather, etc.—can be blamed for a soldier's death. When you are in the war, you are dealing with blame simply by your presence in the battlefield.

5. What other theme does O'Brien revisit in narrating Cross's feelings on the morning after Kiowa's death?

While berating himself for not keeping his men safe, Cross also thinks back on how and why he became involved in the war in the first place. He was simply an ROTC cadet in school, having joined without thinking of the consequences of actually having to go to war—as an officer. This mirrors what O'Brien said in earlier vignettes about the various reasons the men went to war—few if any of them having to do with a sense of the war's rightness.

“Good Form”

1. What ultimately is the power of storytelling?

According to O'Brien, stories—whether factually true or not—have the power to “make things present.”

“Field Trip”

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

Americans associate a Field Trip with a pleasant excursion, a day out of class. Here, this is literally a trip to a field, and it is also much more a pilgrimage than a lark.

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

O'Brien hopes the visit will help her learn something about her father's history. He hopes it may help her understand why he continues to tell war stories after so many years.

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

O'Brien is using simile to describe his inability to move, at first, as he is getting ready to return Kiowa's moccasins. He compares his immobility to the sensation of "waking from a summer nap, feeling lazy and sluggish." As was the case with O'Brien's other comparisons, he links the horrors of war and its emotional and psychological impact with things that are commonplace, trivial, even pleasant.

“The Ghost Soldiers”

1. Why is O'Brien angry with Jorgenson?

When O'Brien is injured during battle, Jorgenson, the new medic, is incapable of moving quickly enough to help him. By the time Jorgenson reaches O'Brien, he is already overcome with pain and is in shock. O'Brien resents the medic's failure to do his job properly. Moreover, O'Brien blames him for having to go through a period of humiliation and isolation due to his injuries.

2. What does O'Brien's desire to hurt Jorgenson reveal about his development as a character?

O'Brien seems to have changed from the naïve college graduate he was in the vignette, "On the Rainy River," in which he decided to go to war simply because he was embarrassed not to and did not want others to think badly of him. Now, he does not care as much about what other people think. He desires to repay pain by inflicting pain.

3. What is significant about the fact that no one except Azar will help O'Brien with his plan for revenge?

In the intensity of war, friendships are made and broken very easily. Having been reassigned, O'Brien is no longer a part of his platoon, yet Jorgenson, the "newcomer," now is.

4. What is the significance of O'Brien's describing Azar's holding his rifle "like a teddy bear"?

Once again, O'Brien emphasizes the ironic juxtaposition of the commonplace and homey with the terror of war. Also, by comparing the rifle to a child's toy, O'Brien is suggesting that he realizes that this planned act of revenge against Jorgenson is childish.

"Night Life"

1. What is the significance of wounding oneself in order to remove oneself from the war?

Removing oneself from the war by wounding oneself is considered an act of cowardice and a source of shame.

2. How do the men react to Rat Kiley's injuring himself?

They are ambivalent. On the one hand, Kiley has committed a shameful act that they all both desire and loathe. On the other hand, however, they refuse to condemn him and even say they will vouch for him.

"The Lives of the Dead"

1. What metaphor does O'Brien use to describe his love for Linda?

O'Brien attempts to describe the love he felt for Linda when he was nine years old by saying, "I wanted to melt into her bones."

2. How does the story of Linda relate to the rest of the novel?

Ultimately, O'Brien reveals that he writes in order to bring his lost comrades and friends back to life, to allow them to be heard once again.

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?

“Love”

1. How does the narrative viewpoint change at the onset of this chapter?

2. Why has Jimmy Cross never forgiven himself for Lavender’s death?

3. What request does Jimmy Cross express as he is leaving O’Brien’s home? What does his request reveal about his character?

“Spin”

1. Why did O'Brien and the other soldiers enjoy watching Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins play checkers?

2. Why does O'Brien present the ideas in this chapter in separate, almost disconnected and fragmented sections?

“On the Rainy River”

1. What is O’Brien suggesting when he describes himself as having had “a modest stand against the war”?

2. How is his ambivalence intensified after he receives his draft notice?

3. What does O’Brien mean when he says he “was too good for this war”?

4. What is ironic about the feeling of isolation O’Brien experiences the summer of his draft notice?

5. How does O’Brien develop the theme of shame in the chapter?

6. What is the effect of O’Brien’s directly addressing the reader at the end of this chapter?

“Enemies”

- 1. Why does Jensen claim that there are “enemies everywhere”?

- 2. How does Dave Jensen’s reaction exemplify the fragile psychology of Vietnam soldiers?

“Friends”

- 1. Why has O’Brien placed this chapter immediately after the previous chapter “Enemies”? What is the connection between the chapters?

- 2. What does the arrangement between Strunk and Jensen reveal about the soldiers in the platoon? What does the fact that Strunk begs Jensen not to fulfill his part of the agreement reveal about Jensen? About soldiers in general?

- 3. Why do Strunk and Jensen enter into their pact in the first place? Why does Strunk want to rescind the pact when he is injured?

- 4. Why is Jensen “relieved” to hear that Strunk has died?

“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?

“The Dentist”

1. Why does O’Brien feel the need to tell the story of Curt Lemon and the dentist?

2. What is ironic about Lemon’s incident with the dentist? Would the irony have been as strong if O’Brien had placed this anecdote *before* the chapter describing Lemon’s death?

3. Why does Curt Lemon ask the dentist to pull his healthy tooth? How does his request illustrate the theme of shame?

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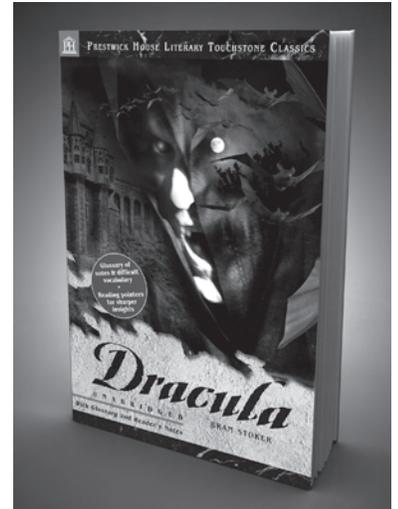
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