

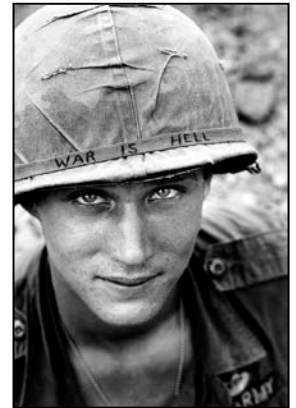
# The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

## Essential Questions:



- 1) What is Vietnam? Think of this in both concrete and abstract terms. What is it for the soldiers? The Vietnamese? The American public? The leaders of both countries? O'Brien?
- 2) What does it mean to be a patriot/patriotic? Consider this for different characters and people within the story.
- 3) Examine how the characters speak. How do they use language to shape reality and their experiences? To cope? To find meaning? Something else?
- 4) What were some of the internal and external conflicts draftees and enlisted soldiers faced during the Vietnam War? How does O'Brien portray these conflicts? Look at language and overall authorial decisions O'Brien makes.
- 5) Considering the extreme circumstances of the Vietnam War, how can having an active imagination be helpful and/or hurtful? Think about the function of imagination in the story for those at war.
- 6) How is *The Things They Carried* a book about storytelling as much as it is a book about war?
- 7) What are ways in which people cope in extremely dangerous circumstances?
- 8) Examine the function of appearance versus reality. Consider idealism and romanticism versus disillusionment and reality for those characters in the war and those at home.
- 9) What is the significance of memory? Think about this from multiple perspectives. Consider the context of story and your own experiences.
- 10) How does O'Brien demystify romantic notions of war, patriotism, and heroism?
- 11) When is war justified? When is it not? What is the responsibility of an individual when one's country participates in a war he/she doesn't believe in? What is the responsibility of people in power when considering entering a war?
- 12) What types of burdens do people "carry" with them before, during, and after the war? What types of burdens does society carry as a whole carry?
- 13) How does morality fit into warfare?
- 14) How does O'Brien try to lend a voice to those who can no longer be heard? Think of Norman Bowker, Kiowa, Lemon, and Ted Lavender as well as Linda.
- 15) Victor Frankl, a man who spent time as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote the following: "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death." How do O'Brien and other characters within the text try and either fail or succeed at making meaning of suffering?
- 16) O'Brien's stories act often more as fragments rather than a cohesive whole. What might O'Brien's purpose be in constructing his book this way?



## Rhetorical Strategies and Literary Devices to focus on as you read:

- **DIDLSTone** – Diction, Imagery, Details, Language (including figurative language), Syntax, and Tone: How does the author use these specific strategies for *purpose*
- **Repetition, Parallel Structure, Juxtaposition, Paradox, Ethos, Pathos, and Logos:** How does the author use these specific strategies for *purpose*
- **Characterization:** *Indirect* (actions, thoughts, appearance, dialogue) and *direct* (author tells you directly)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Things They Carried

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples from the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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## "The Things They Carried"

**Context:** Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam War veteran, wrote *The Things They Carried* – a collection of stories loosely based off of his experiences in the war. O'Brien, a native of Minnesota, was drafted by the U.S. Army after he earned his B.A. degree in political science. After considering escaping to Canada, O'Brien served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970 as an infantryman in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, which held the same unit responsible for the infamous [My Lai Massacre](#). O'Brien arrived in Vietnam one year after the massacre. Confused, he did not understand why people were so hostile. 20 years after his service, O'Brien wrote *The Things They Carried*. The story is a blend of fact and fiction. It does not follow a traditional linear plot. Instead, each "chapter" is its own story or vignette while also connecting to others. With each story, a new layer of meaning and perspective is added. Think about the organization of the book. What is its effect? How do the various stories contribute to O'Brien's overall purpose?

### Quotes from O'Brien:

"I carry the memories or the ghosts of a place called Vietnam, the people of Vietnam, my fellow soldiers. More importantly, I guess, I carry the weight of responsibility and a sense of abiding guilt. I carry joyful memories, too, friends I made and the conversations at foxholes where, for a moment or two, the war would seem to vanish into camaraderie and friendship." ([Interview with NPR](#))

"If by some accident your boot touches down on a piece of ground that's been mined you're gonna be messed up for life or dead. And just the deed of walking, day by day, took a kind of valor that's hard to describe, walking down a street in New York or Chicago you don't think about it, just walking. But in the Pinkville area because it was so heavily mined, and so heavily VC, and so dangerous, just walking was a kind of nightmare." ([Interview with PBS](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>Than Khe</b> – Area in Vietnam; place of a major battle (Tet Offensive)	<b>Tangible</b> (touchable) and <b>Intangible</b> (no physical properties/can't be touched).
<b>Grunts</b> – U.S. foot soldiers, infantrymen	<b>AO</b> – Area of Operations
<b>Bouncing Betty</b> – A type of explosive mine/booby trap; explodes after "bouncing" about waste-level	<b>Claymore</b> – Another type of mine; one that spreads shrapnel
<b>KIA</b> – Killed in Action	<b>Shrapnel</b> – Fragments as a result of an explosion
<b>Bonnie and Clyde</b> – Movie about two lovers who go on a robbing spree during the Great Depression	<b>SOP</b> – Standard Operating Procedure
<b>RTO</b> – Radio Telephone Operator	<b>Freedom Bird</b> – Aircraft returning soldiers to U.S.

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Letters and Photographs, Drugs, Weight, Memories, Talismans and Superstition, Appearance vs. Reality, Morals, Humor

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between tangible and intangible weight in the first chapter? Which one is more burdensome and why?
- 2) Examine the storyline. How do the events progress? O'Brien doesn't tell the story in a traditional linear structure. What is the effect of this non-linear storyline? Review Ted Lavender's story.



- 3) Read the quotes by O'Brien above. How do they ring true in this section?
- 4) Why is imagination dangerous for the soldiers O'Brien follows?
- 5) The soldiers carry a certain appearance that contrasts with their actual inner state. How does appearance contrast with reality?
- 6) Jimmy Cross carries the burden of guilt over Ted Lavender's death. Is this guilt justified?
- 7) The soldiers often speak in crude or somewhat humorous language. What might be the function of language as used by the soldiers in this chapter?
- 8) Why do you think Martha's virginity is so important for Lieutenant Jimmy Cross?
- 9) In what ways are Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and Martha different?
- 10) "Necessity dictated," notes O'Brien. What are the different types of necessities? What function do certain items hold?
- 11) How does O'Brien dispel some romantic views of war in his first chapter?
- 12) Examine O'Brien's sentence structure when describing the things the soldiers carried. How does O'Brien's sentence structure contribute to his purpose?
- 13) What are ways in which the soldiers try to relieve the burden of the things they carry?
- 14) Why does Mitchell Sanders always point at the "moral"?
- 15) What does it mean for the soldiers to carry Vietnam? What are the literal and figurative ways in which they carry this burden?
- 16) What is the "cross" Jimmy Cross (JC) must bear?
- 17) Personal reflection – What are the tangible and intangible "things" you "carry" that weigh you down or offer you hope?



The image ["Corporal William Cox Emerges from a Viet Cong Tunnel"](#) USMC Archives. [CC BY 2.0](#)

### *The Things I Carry*

Tangible	Intangible

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "The Things They Carried"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Chapters - "Love" and "Spin"

### Quote from O'Brien:

"... and I didn't meet any communists out there preaching Marxism, and Engels — you met poor people who were trying to stay alive and feed their families and themselves, and where they may have been indifferent 10 years before, they weren't indifferent anymore, nor would anyone else be. It was the way to lose a war. Because you take people out of their houses and you move them. And big aggregates of people, and you boss them around, and you call all the shots, and you beat up on people, and you trash everything that could be trashed — all in the name of searching for the enemy. The consequences are you make enemies. You may kill a few Vietcong along the way, but you are making enemies — just imagine one baby being shot by accident — it's got a mother and a father and an uncle and aunt and friends and brothers and sisters — and they may have been indifferent before that baby died, but they're not indifferent anymore and nor would you or anyone else." ([Interview with PBS](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>Batangan Peninsula</b> – A heavily mined area in Vietnam; was a Vietcong stronghold	<b>USO</b> – United Service Organization – organization that aimed at raising the troop's morale through entertainment
<b>GI</b> – "Government Issue" – a soldier	<b>Poppa-san</b> – Slang for an elderly Vietnamese man
<b>AWOL</b> – Absent without Leave (gone without official permission)	<b>Paddy</b> – A rice field

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Photographs, Memories, Talismans and Superstition, Nature

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) Examine the titles of these two chapters. How do the titles connect to the content?
- 2) These two chapters provide time shifts. We see Jimmy Cross and O'Brien not as young soldiers but now as older men reflecting on their experiences. What is the effect of this time shift?
- 3) Many of the chapters connect. The story is not a simple linear plot, but it bounces around. Each chapter provides another layer and angle to various stories embedded within the novel. How do "The Things They Carried," "Love," and "Spin" connect and offer different layers and angles to the story?
- 4) Read the quote above by O'Brien. How do details ring true in his stories?
- 5) How has the Vietnam War still stuck with Jimmy Cross and Tim O'Brien?
- 6) In "Spin," O'Brien details inhumane actions of some of the soldiers. What are some of these actions? What might O'Brien's purpose be in detailing these events?
- 7) How does O'Brien dispel some romantic views of war in these two chapters?
- 8) Examine each character. How do they differ? In what ways do they adapt to or try to cope with their situations? Some to consider: Azar, Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Jimmy Cross.
- 9) Examine tone. What is O'Brien's tone when reflecting on the war in "Love" and detailing the soldiers' burdens in "The Things They Carried"? How might these different





tones connect to O'Brien's purpose in each of these chapters?

10) O'Brien includes episodes where the war wasn't always the "bad stuff." What purpose does O'Brien's outlining of more humorous or lighthearted events serve?

11) O'Brien devotes time to examining how his memory functions when thinking back on the war. Review his descriptions of memory. Should we doubt his recollections?

12) What is the function of stories according to O'Brien?

13) Examine how the violence of the war is juxtaposed with peace and/or the beauty of nature. Find examples of this juxtaposition and consider how they contribute to one or more of O'Brien's purposes. Use the table below to help organize your examples.

Beauty/Peace	Violence/Brutality

Effect of these contrasts/juxtapositions?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "Love" and "Spin"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
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- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



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Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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## "On the Rainy River"

**Context:** O'Brien's home state of Minnesota sits at the Canadian border. After being drafted to fight in Vietnam, O'Brien, like many other young men, struggled with the decision to go to a war he did not believe in and understand, or avoid it through other means—such as “dodging” the draft by going to Canada. The story O'Brien tells here, however, is not true – not in the factual sense. Read the quote below. Consider what O'Brien says about the types of truth and the role of fiction. Do you agree?

**Quote:** From a lecture O'Brien gave at [Brown University](#).

“It's - invented. No Elroy, no Tip-Top Lodge, no pig factory, I'm trying to think of what else. I've never been to the Rainy River in my life. Uh, not even close to it. I haven't been within two hundred miles of the place. No boats. But, although the story I invented, it's still true, which is what fiction is all about. Uh, if I were to tell you the literal truth of what happened to me in the summer of nineteen sixty-eight, all I could tell you was that I played golf, and I worried about getting drafted. But that's a crappy story. Isn't it? It doesn't - it doesn't open any door to what I was feeling in the summer of nineteen sixty-eight. That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth. The pig factory is there for those dreams of slaughter - they were quite real inside of me. And in my own heart, I was certainly on that rainy river, trying to decide what to do, whether to go to the war or not go to it, say no or say yes. The story is still true, even though on one level it's not; it's made up.



The image “[Autumn on the Rainy River](#)” by Tony Webster. [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

The point was not to pull a fast one, any more than, you know, Mark Twain is trying to pull a fast one in *Huckleberry Finn*. Stories make you believe, that's what dialogue is for, that's what plot is for, and character. It's there to make you believe it as you're reading it. You don't read *Huckleberry Finn* saying ‘This never happened, this never happened, this never happened, this never happened’ – I mean, you don't do that, or go to *The Godfather* and say, you know, no horse head. I mean, you don't think that way; you believe. A verisimilitude and truth in that literal sense, to me, is ultimately irrelevant. What is relevant is the human heart.”

### **Essential Terminology:**

<b>Verisimilitude</b> – The appearance of being true or real	<b>USS Maddox</b> – A destroyer that was allegedly pursued by Vietnamese before the Vietnam War
<b>Gulf of Tonkin</b> – Place of conflict before the Vietnam War; events here would lead to U.S. direct involvement in the war.	<b>Ho Chi Minh</b> – President of North Vietnam during the war – sought unification of the country
<b>Geneva Accords</b> – Rules regarding warfare and treatment of prisoners of war (POWs)	<b>SEATO</b> – Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
<b>Domino Theory</b> – U.S. belief that if one country fell to communism, the surrounding countries would do so as well.	<b>LBJ</b> – Lyndon B. Johnson – President of the United States at the start of the Vietnam War (start of direct involvement in the war)
<b>Westmoreland</b> – U.S. Army general who commanded U.S. forces during the Vietnam War	<b>CO Status</b> – Conscientious Objector – Status given to those claim the right to refuse military service.
<b>Diem's Tyranny</b> – Diem was South Vietnam's first president; however, he ruled as a dictator	<b>Bao Dai</b> – 13 <sup>th</sup> and final emperor of Nguyen Dynasty; lost to Diem

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** The pig factory, the river, the wilderness (archetype), religious references, imagination, sight/looking,

**Guiding Questions:**

- 1) What could the border symbolize for O'Brien?
- 2) How does the story O'Brien constructs express his feelings and internal conflict more effectively than a factual retelling of events would?
- 3) Elroy Berdahl is not real. What, then, could he represent? Near the end of the story, O'Brien notes how he had a feeling that Elroy wouldn't be back. Figuratively, what could this mean?
- 4) How does O'Brien dispel romantic notions of war, heroism, and patriotism through this story?
- 5) Water is an archetype that often represents birth or rebirth, such as in baptisms (spiritual rebirth). The wilderness is another archetype often representing a difficult or trying time, sometimes when a character is unsure of themselves and their purpose. How do these archetypes fit into this story? How do they contribute to O'Brien's purpose?
- 6) How does O'Brien juxtapose his desires as a young man and the conflict he faces?
- 7) Examine the various tones O'Brien constructs when detailing the narrator's (Tim O'Brien, but not exactly *the* Tim O'Brien) tone towards the war, the people supporting the war, and his decision.
- 8) O'Brien shifts from first person to second person, directly addressing the reader. What is the purpose and effect of this shift?
- 9) Examine the imagery in the story, especially when O'Brien is on the river considering jumping the border. What are the images? How do they contribute to O'Brien's purpose?
- 10) "Not biting," Elroy says as O'Brien cries. Explain this metaphor.
- 11) Explain the irony here and how it relates to previous stories from the book: "I was a coward. I went to the war."
- 12) Examine all the things O'Brien "sees" near the end of the story. What is the purpose of this listing? These images? List the ones you find most compelling below and note why a few of them are significant to O'Brien's message:




Significance to O'Brien's Message:



[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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# **"Enemies," "Friends" "How to Tell A True War Story," and "The Dentist"**

## **Quotes by O'Brien:**

"The goal, I suppose, any fiction writer has, no matter what your subject, is to hit the human heart and the tear ducts and the nape of the neck and to make a person feel something about the characters are going through and to experience the moral paradoxes and struggles of being human." ([Washington Times](#))

"And in a way, for me, although on the surface, of course, it is a book about war, it's I've never thought of it, really, that way in my heart. Even when I was writing it, it seemed to be a book about storytelling and the burdens we all accumulate through our lives, our moms and dads and backyards, teachers, which I mean, my dad died, I don't know, four years ago, and he is as gone as anybody I knew in Vietnam." ([Interview with NPR](#))

## **Essential Terminology:**

<b>LZ Gator</b> – A landing zone that was south of Chu Lai	<b>Cooze</b> – Insulting/Derogatory name for a woman
<b>LZ</b> – Landing Zone	<b>VC</b> – Vietcong, a mass political force with its own army; army fought and won in South Vietnam
<b>Chu Lai</b> – Location where many troops were stationed	<b>M-16</b> – A widely used American rifle during the Vietnam War

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Games, Stories, Truth, Mountains, Violence, Storytelling, Appearance vs. Reality, Silence and Sound

## **Guiding Questions:**

### **Enemies**

- 1) What do you make of the violence between Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk? Where did it originate? Why does it reach the level it does?
- 2) How does Jensen's fear over Lee Strunk after the fight connect to other fears in the story?
- 3) Analyze the title. How does it connect to the story? What does it mean to be an "enemy" in this story?
- 4) What do you make of Lee Strunk's reaction to Jensen's actions?

### **Friends**

- 1) Analyze the title. How does it connect to events in the story? What does it mean to be a friend in this story? How does this connect and/or contrast with being an enemy?
- 2) Why do you think Jensen and Strunk became friends after their fight?





- 3) Strunk and Jensen's "contract" doesn't match what happens in reality. What do you think O'Brien's message or purpose is here?
- 4) How does Strunk's fear mirror or contrast with his fear in "enemies"?
- 5) O'Brien introduces another type of weight at the very end of this story. Are you surprised about Jensen's feelings? Is he wrong? What might this reaction express about soldiers' experiences in Vietnam?
- 6) Compare and contrast these two stories. Make a list of key details from "Enemies" in the left column, and key details in "Friends" in the right column. Next, tie these events to O'Brien's purpose.


#### How to Tell a True War Story

- 1) Rat Kiley tries to construct a letter to honor a fellow soldier and offer comfort to his family. He doesn't receive a response. What might O'Brien be expressing about the war? About home?
- 2) Why does a true war story NOT tell a moral? Why are morals, according to O'Brien, lies in war story? Are there morals in O'Brien's story?
- 3) List below the requirements O'Brien notes for writing a true war story. How do these standards contrast with more traditional views of stories?


- 4) Review this story for juxtaposition and irony. Connect each to a central purpose of O'Brien's.
- 5) Outline paradoxes O'Brien writes into his narrative. What function do these paradoxes serve? What might they express about war and storytelling?
- 6) Games are mentioned occasionally throughout the book. What could be the function of games in this story? What could they help express?
- 7) How does O'Brien express the limits of language in this story?
- 8) What is the role of stories based on the events of "How to Tell a True War Story"?
- 9) Often, from my experience, a fair amount of students feel cheated by O'Brien's storytelling, about how events aren't entirely true. Do you feel this way? Why or why not?
- 10) What are Mitchell Sanders' tones while he is storytelling? How does his tone help express character and a purpose of O'Brien's?
- 11) Examine Mitchell Sanders' diction while he tells his story. Analyze how he describes people, his feelings, Vietnam, the unknown.
- 12) How does Mitchell Sanders' storytelling and purpose for storytelling connect to O'Brien's?
- 13) How can the experiences of war eat away at the humanity of soldiers as expressed in the book thus far?
- 14) What are the problems with generalizing about war, according to O'Brien?
- 15) How is war like "a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent"? How do the events of the book so far fit this description?
- 16) O'Brien shifts to second person at various points in this section. Why? What effect does this have?
- 17) How does O'Brien define war? Examine the contradictions O'Brien lists. How could this help express truths about soldiers' experiences during the war?
- 18) O'Brien writes that what he remembers of Curt Lemon's death is Jensen's song. Why do you think this is the case? What is the significance of this memory?
- 19) How can a true story be something that did not happen?
- 20) How does O'Brien express the confusion of defining Vietnam – its paradoxes, uncertainties, incongruities?



### The Dentist

- 1) We learn a little more about O'Brien in the early part of this chapter. What do we learn?
- 2) We learn more about Curt Lemon in this section. How does this section provide a different description of Curt? Does this change your view of his death?
- 3) What's ironic about Lemon's fear of the dentist?
- 4) What authorial purpose does Lemon's experience with the dentist serve?
- 5) How do Lemon's actions connect to previous descriptions of bravery and cowardice, appearance versus reality?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

"Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell A True War Story,"  
and "The Dentist"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

## "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

**Context:** There are many ways you can approach and analyze this story: as a tale of innocence to experience and/or corruption, the corrupting and dehumanizing forces of war, the unclear lines between "friend" and "enemy," for example. While reading, think about these possible approaches.

### Quote from O'Brien:

"It's an emblem more than anything-an emblem of a spiritual "lostness" and of a spiritual "searchingness," combined. As a kid, I once got lost in the Minnesota wilderness. I spent a couple of miserable hours blundering around in the forest, an 8-year-old, totally turned upside down. The experience hit me hard and stayed with me into adulthood. And throughout my fiction, I've called upon that experience as a way of addressing, or dramatizing, a certain spiritual disorientation and confusion people sometimes encounter. I certainly felt lost in Vietnam, and not just in a physical sense. Others might feel lost in a career that is going nowhere, or in a bad marriage, or in the loss of a beloved child. In my books, the whole notion of "lostness" ultimately takes on a psychological and spiritual dimension." ([The Writer](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>ARVN</b> – Army of the Republic of Vietnam – South Vietnamese Soldiers	<b>Culottes</b> – item of female clothing; pants that reflect a split skirt – hangs like a skirt but act as pants
<b>NCO</b> – Noncommissioned Officer	<b>E-6</b> – A military grade for an enlisted man
<b>RF/PF</b> – South Vietnamese "Regional Forces" or "Popular Forces" – called "Ruff-Puffs" by American soldiers; they were recruited locally	<b>Gook</b> – A derogatory term often used during the war for the Vietnamese
<b>Green Berets</b> – The special forces of the U.S. Army – trained in guerilla warfare	<b>EM Club</b> – Enlisted Man "Club"
<b>Hootch</b> – A makeshift dwelling or hut – could be civilian or military	<b>Tra Bong</b> – A river in Vietnam that travels through the Quang Ngai Province
<b>CID</b> – Criminal Investigation Department	<b>Trip Flare</b> – A flare attached to wire that would signal when someone hit the wire
<b>Splint</b> – Material used to support or restrain a broken bone	<b>MP</b> – Military Police

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Eyes, The Wilderness and Water, Weapons and Military Gear, Cleveland Heights, Mary Anne's Appearance (Clothes, Makeup, Jewelry, etc.), Innocence, Night vs. Day, Dreams (as in, desires, hopes), Color, Music

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) Note areas where Mary Anne Bell changes. How does Rat Kiley portray her in the beginning? The middle? The end?
- 2) Compare and contrast how O'Brien describes Mary Anne Bell at different stages of the story. What is the effect of these changing descriptions? What could be the purpose?
- 3) ARVN, or the South Vietnamese soldiers, fought alongside American soldiers before, during, and after American involvement in Vietnam. These soldiers suffered between 110,000 to

250,000 deaths between 1960 and 1975. What is O'Brien's attitude towards these soldiers?  
([Tom Valentine](#))

- 4) What kind of stories last, according to O'Brien? What does this mean?
- 5) What function can a story hold for the storyteller? The audience? Point to events in the text.
- 6) What could O'Brien's purpose be in outlining the change Mary Anne Bell experiences?
- 7) In 1960s America, women could be fired for becoming pregnant or even overweight, they couldn't get a credit card unless a husband cosigned, and many states wouldn't allow for women to serve on juries because they thought women were too fragile, and a woman's place was at the center of a home. Ivy League schools, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, didn't accept female applicants until the late sixties or seventies. Yet this was also a decade of change. The sixties saw a second major wave of feminism, and many women pushed for equal rights. How could Mary Anne's characteristics at various stages connect to and contrast with gender roles during 1960s America? Could these societal norms be a reason for her embracing Vietnam?
- 8) What is the function of Mitchel Sanders in this story? Consider him in different contexts. Explain.
- 9) Eddie Diamond, early in Mary Anne's story, notes that she will "most definitely learn." Mary Anne does learn, but not in the way that Diamond thought. How does Mary Anne's change contrast what you think Diamond meant by this comment?
- 10) How does the power dynamic between Mark Fossie and Mary Anne change? Between Mary Anne and the other soldiers? Point to specific events in the text.
- 11) Mary Anne notes that she has never been happier in her life than when she is in Vietnam. What could she be happy about? What might be O'Brien's purpose or message here?
- 12) What is Vietnam? Think of it in terms of this chapter.
- 13) How does O'Brien describe the compound and surrounding area in this chapter? How do these descriptions characterize Vietnam and his experience there?
- 14) How do the characters of Mark Fossie and Jimmy Cross connect? Contrast?
- 15) How would you characterize Rat Kiley as a narrator? Why?
- 16) Examine how O'Brien describes the Green Berets. How does he describe them? What might their role be in this story?
- 17) How does Mary Anne come to represent the war? What does she represent, at different stages, to Mark Fossie?
- 18) How is Mary Anne's identity erased? What was this identity?
- 19) What's Rat Kiley's attitude towards and perception of women? Why does he "love" Mary Anne?
- 20) Is there a moral to O'Brien's/Rat Kiley's story? Does "Sweetheart" fit O'Brien's requirements for a "true" war story?
- 21) The wilderness and water are motifs/archetypes we see in "On the Rainy River." Compare and contrast the use and meaning of these motifs in "On the Rainy River" with "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong."
- 22) Connect "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" to previous stories in O'Brien's book – "Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell a True War Story," "The Things They Carried," etc. Next, examine how "Sweetheart" adds another layer of meaning to these stories.
- 23) O'Brien noted that a true war story doesn't end. Does "Sweetheart" fit this requirement?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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# "Stockings," "Church," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Style"

## Quote by O'Brien:

"One of you wants to be super careful and make sure those people don't kill you, and the other part of you feels, 'man, these poor people, they're just civilians and innocent — maybe their brothers and uncles and sons and so on are Vietcong but that's a baby, and that's a child, and that's a teenager, and that's a mom' — and if that were my village I'd know how I'd feel." ([Interview with O'Brien, PBS](#))

## Essential Terminology:

<b>Pagoda</b> – a sacred building; a Buddhist temple	<b>Ambush</b> – A surprise attack given by those hiding from the "enemy"
<b>Hamlet</b> – a living community that is very small, often smaller than a village	<b>Tot Dong</b> – Decisive battle in the 15 <sup>th</sup> century in which Vietnamese established independence from China
<b>My Khe</b> – Area of an infamous massacre during the Vietnam War where Vietnamese civilians were executed	<b>Hootch</b> - A makeshift dwelling or hut – could be civilian or military
<b>Trung Sisters</b> – Female rebels who led a movement and fight for Vietnamese independence	<b>Tran Hung Dao</b> – 13 <sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese military leader who fought invading Mongols
<b>Le Loi</b> – Emperor in Vietnam in early 15 <sup>th</sup> century; won independence from China	

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Water, Cleaning and Cleaning Motions, Talismans, Fog, Stars, Silence, Dancing, the trail or "road," red, yellow, blue, and memories

## Guiding Questions:

### Stockings

- 1) Examine O'Brien's description of Henry Dobbins. What does he mean by "he was like America itself"? Consider the different parts to the description, from "big" to "drawn toward sentimentality" (111).
- 2) What does O'Brien's take on Henry Dobbins suggest about his attitudes towards America?
- 3) Various characters carry good-luck charms or "talismans." What purpose do these talismans serve? What do soldiers' beliefs in the talismans convey about war?
- 4) Why stockings? O'Brien titles his chapter "Stockings." He doesn't dedicate chapters to the other talismans that soldiers carry. Why focus on "stockings"?



### Church

- 1) A pagoda is a place of worship for Hindus and Buddhists. What is the state of the pagoda in this story? How does this state and description help convey a purpose or message of O'Brien's? Think about what the pagoda or "church" could represent.
- 2) Compare and contrast Kiowa and Henry Dobbins' characters. What are some key contrasts? Similarities?

- 3) The monks, people of peace, take time cleaning Henry Dobbins' weapon. What's the irony here? How does this action by the monks contribute to O'Brien's purpose?
- 4) The monks call Henry Dobbins, who O'Brien described as "like America," as "soldier Jesus" (114). What's the irony of this comment?
- 5) What's the irony of Dobbins' last comment: "All you can do is be nice. Treat them decent, you know?" (117). How does this comment connect to O'Brien's message about the war?
- 6) What does spirituality and/or religion mean to Kiowa? Dobbins?
- 7) What role does Kiowa play in this story? Think about his commentary while speaking to Dobbins.
- 8) Think about the title. What does "Church" mean for the monks? For Dobbins? For Kiowa? For Jimmy Cross?

### The Man I Killed

- 1) Read the quote from O'Brien above. How does this quote connect to events in this story?
- 2) How could you connect the events of this story back to "Enemies" and "Friends"?
- 3) How are O'Brien and the man he killed alike? Make a list below, then, comment on the significance of these similarities.


- 4) Do a close reading of the title. Try to find significance in each of the words – significance for O'Brien, for his purpose, for theme, etc.
- 5) O'Brien does not talk at all during this story. In fact, we have not heard O'Brien the young soldier talk at all yet. What is the effect of this silence? What is the effect of only hearing Kiowa's words and pleas?
- 6) How does O'Brien humanize the man he killed?
- 7) Review the descriptions of the man O'Brien killed. Look at the colors, shapes, etc. What is the significance of each description? What might each signify?
- 8) Compare and contrast Kiowa and Azar. Next, consider what each character might represent and/or how each character helps further one of O'Brien's themes or purposes.
- 9) How does O'Brien project similar conflicts and situations in America to the conflicts and situations he gives the man he killed through O'Brien's story?
- 10) The waste of the Vietnam War is something O'Brien expresses throughout the book. He will portray this waste in more detail later on; however, examine how O'Brien expresses the wastefulness of war in this section.
- 11) Trails or roads are often symbolic. What could the trail symbolize in this story?

- 12) Kiowa calls O'Brien's kill a "good kill"? What do you think this means? What is NOT a "good kill"? Explain.
- 13) Examine how the violence of the war is juxtaposed with peace and/or the beauty of nature. Find examples of this juxtaposition and consider how they contribute to one or more of O'Brien's purposes.
- 14) How does O'Brien dispel some romantic views of war in this story?
- 15) Examine the different tones in this story. What tone does Kiowa convey when speaking to O'Brien? What tone does Azar express? What tone does O'Brien employ when he focuses on the man he killed?
- 16) The last word of the story is a plea by Kiowa: "talk," Kiowa says. O'Brien does not "talk" in this story; however, how might O'Brien be giving a voice to the man he killed and how might he be "talking" through the stories he creates?

### Ambush

- 1) When O'Brien wrote this book, he did not have a daughter named Kathleen. He created her. Consider why O'Brien might have created Kathleen. What purpose does she hold? What perspectives do we gain by having Kathleen in the story?
- 2) O'Brien repeats images of the fog. What could the fog represent? Think of multiple possibilities.



- 3) We gain a new perspective on "The Man I Killed" through this story. What do we learn? What purpose does this chapter hold compared to "The Man I Killed"?
- 4) How does O'Brien dispel romantic views of war in this story?
- 5) How does this story express the blurred line between friends and enemies during this war?
- 6) Review O'Brien's repetition of first-person pronouns in various parts of this story. What purpose and/or effect does this repetition serve?

### Style


- 1) Review this story for juxtaposition and irony. Connect each to a central purpose of O'Brien's.
- 2) Answer Azar's question: Why is the girl dancing?
- 3) How does O'Brien dispel romantic views of war in this story?
- 4) What does Henry Dobbins mean when he tells Azar to "dance right"?
- 5) This is a very short story/vignette in O'Brien's book. What purpose does it serve? How does it connect to the other stories?
- 6) Examine the word choice connected to the girl dancing. What connotations do these words hold? How do they contrast with the girl's surroundings?
- 7) The "fog" returns in this story. Why?
- 8) Connect the title of this story to its events. Think of both the soldiers and the girl.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

"Stockings," "Church" "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," "Style"

Steps:



- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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## "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes"

**Context:** In World War II, soldiers who returned home were greeted as heroes – towns and cities threw parades to honor the sacrifices of the soldiers. Soldiers returning home from Vietnam, however, were not greeted in the same manner. They returned to a country torn over the war in Vietnam. Many soldiers felt they returned to a world that no longer cared about them, even resented them, and many soldiers had difficulty returning to civilian life. Emotional trauma, physical injuries, rejection from family and friends, and antiwar attitudes made their homecoming and transition back to life in the United States difficult for many. Some soldiers questioned the justification for the war itself and had to confront their own actions within it. Most soldiers were met with very little greeting at all after returning home. Family, friends, and acquaintances, uncomfortable in the presence of recent veterans, seemed unwilling to speak about the war and often appeared indifferent. As a result, many soldiers felt isolated, rejected, and alone ([Vietnam War Reference Library](#)). While reading "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes," consider how O'Brien expresses this struggle to transition back into American society, and how he conveys the difficulty in finding meaning and connection away from the war.

**Quote from O'Brien:** "I came home happy to be alive. No dreams, no midnight sweats, none of that stuff. For a while I was smug about it — that I didn't suffer. I looked down on those who did as whiners. I remember being so happy not to come home to all the things we were supposed to want — parades, bands. Who wants to come home from the Army and march in a parade?" ([Lyons](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>The Silver Star</b> – An award for valor in the United States Armed Forces	<b>A&amp;W</b> – Chain of restaurants known for its root beer floats
<b>Mama-san</b> – Slang used for any older Vietnamese woman	<b>Sousa march</b> – Marches from John Philip Sousa, often military and patriotic in nature

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Father/Son Relationships, Kids, The Road, the Lake, the Chevy, Baseball, the Silver Star, rain/water, filth, light and darkness

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) In a later chapter, O'Brien notes that "stories can save us." How is this idea reflected in his writing? Think about those who were and were not able to adequately communicate their stories.
- 2) Examine the title, "Speaking of Courage." Who are the different people "speaking" here, and what are their different views on "courage"? Who is able and unable to "speak" in a manner that properly communicates their messages and experiences? What might be O'Brien's purpose or message through these characters?
- 3) Viktor Frankl, a man who spent time as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote the following: "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death." How do O'Brien and other characters within the text try and either fail or succeed at making meaning of suffering?
- 4) How does O'Brien express the difficulties and continued presence of Vietnam after the war? What issues does O'Brien address through Norman Bowker?
- 5) Review the first quote by O'Brien above. How





did his attitude change based off of his portrayal of Norman Bowker? How did his attitude as a young soldier returning from war reflect the attitudes of others in his story?

- 6) Father and son relationships is another motif. Review Norman Bowker's relationship with his father and how it impacts him. Next, compare this relationship to the man O'Brien killed and his father.
- 7) Bowker passes two "little boys" as he drives around the lake. What could these kids signify?
- 8) How do the fireworks on the river contrast with the actual war? How do the qualities of the lake contrast with the "shit field"?
- 9) How does O'Brien express the waste of war in this story?
- 10) How does this story add another layer of meaning to O'Brien's collection? How does it contribute to one of O'Brien's purposes?
- 11) The issue of guilt and culpability arises in this story again. Compare Bowker's guilt over Kiowa's death with Jimmy Cross's over Tim Lavender's. How do these two characters convey a message of O'Brien's?
- 12) How does O'Brien express Norman Bowker's disconnect from society through Sally Kramer, Max, the workmen, and his other friends/interactions?
- 13) What is the significance of the circular motion Bowker drives in? What's the significance of the lake's central position? How does the archetype of the road fit into this circular motion?
- 14) Many key events take place on or around bodies of water. The Rainy River, the shit field, the Tra Bong River, the lake. Why? How does the setting contribute to meaning? Symbolism?
- 15) What is O'Brien's tone when telling Bowker's story? How does this tone connect to his purpose -- the purpose of telling Bowker's story? What is this purpose?
- 16) O'Brien narrates Bowker's telling himself all the things he "would" or "would not" say to Sally and others. Review these episodes. What does he wish to say? What does he actually say? What is the effect or purpose behind these internal dialogues?
- 17) The number 7 is an archetype for the completion of a cycle and perfect order. It is the union of 3 (light, spiritual awareness, unity) and 4 (the circle, life, seasons, elements). Review "Speaking of Courage" for this number. What could it mean in this story?
- 18) The number 12 holds significance in the story. Norman Bowker completes 12 revolutions around the lake. What could the number 12 signify? There are 12 months of the year, 12 apostles in the Bible,  $12 \times 2 = 24$  hours (a complete day), and a product of  $3 \times 4$ . What other associations are there with the number 12? What could be this number's significance to this story?
- 19) The civilian world is trickled with reminders of Vietnam – the language from Mama Burgers, the fireworks, the lake, toy rifles, canteens, Sousa marches, etc. What is the significance of these reminders? How do they differ in the civilian work versus the battlefield?
- 20) Bowker describes how the Song Tra Bong, during monsoon season, sucks things up. What might the Song Tra Bong symbolize? Or as O'Brien calls it, the shit field? Why?
- 21) How does Kiowa's death contrast with more romantic versions of heroic deaths in warfare? Consider how O'Brien describes Kiowa's death and how these descriptions help convey his purpose.
- 22) How does the time of day contribute to the story? What could the time of day symbolize? The season in which the story takes place (summer)?
- 23) What layer of meaning to "Speaking of Courage" is added in "Notes"?
- 24) What effect and/or significance does Norman Bowker's letter have on the story? How does his reaction to Bowker's letters connect to the quote by O'Brien above?
- 25) What do O'Brien's inventions or fictions help to "clarify and explain" about war?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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## "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip"

### Quotes by O'Brien:

"On viewing some of the scenes from the Ken Burns Vietnam War documentary: "It makes me cry," he said. "I can't stop crying. I can't stop thinking of what a waste it all was." ([The Washington Post](#))

"I returned to Vietnam in '94 and even then, all those decades later, walking around that place I remained afraid. And, in some ways, rightly so. The place is still littered with landmines. And kids were still getting blown up now and then by the artifacts of the, you know, all those years back. But there was a shimmer of -- history shades a place, and you look at a place differently in the same way for you to visit Antietam or Gettysburg or places like that where you feel the ground has still got a little heartbeat of evil inside of it, and of human, human shortcoming that still seems to beat with that, for me anyway...." ([Interview, PBS](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>Karl Marx</b> – Philosopher and author of <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>	<b>Mortars</b> – Explosive shells
<b>MIA</b> – Missing in Action	<b>Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum</b> – Where Ho Chi Minh was buried

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Mud, Water/Rain, The Song Tra Bong, Stench, Colors, Photos, Shoes, Filth, Father and Son Relationships

### Guiding Questions:

#### In the Field

- 1) What could the Song Tra Bong, which is overflowing, symbolize about the war?
- 2) Compare and contrast Kiowa's character with the kind of death he received. How does Kiowa's character and his death serve one of O'Brien's purposes?
- 3) The "filth seemed to erase identities." What does this mean on a figurative level? Explain.
- 4) Compare and contrast Jimmy Cross's experiences and feelings in this story versus in the very first one ("The Things They Carried").
- 5) Examine the possible symbolism in the following excerpt: "The search went slowly. For a time the morning seemed to brighten, the sky going to a lighter shade of silver, but then the rains came back hard and steady. There was the feel of permanent twilight" (157).
- 6) What do you make of Azar's commentary on Kiowa's death?
- 7) What new perspective do we gain from this story? How does this perspective and Norman's perspective contribute to O'Brien's purpose? What is one of his purposes?
- 8) How do the different soldiers deal with guilt in this story?
- 9) What do you make of the association Jimmy Cross has with the golf course in his hometown while his men search for Kiowa's body? What does this say about the war? The soldiers? Their experiences?



- 10) A sense of meaninglessness pervades the characters and their experiences with war. Jimmy Cross, a leader, felt that "Military matters meant nothing." How does a sense of meaninglessness pervade other characters?
- 11) The rain is a persistent force in this story. What could the rain signify?
- 12) The young boy wanting to cry remains unnamed. What is the purpose of this soldier's namelessness?
- 13) Who is most guilty for the death of Kiowa? Why?
- 14) We expect the boy to be looking for Kiowa's body, but in actuality, he was looking for his picture of Billie. How can we explain this behavior? Why is the picture so important? Connect this back to Jimmy Cross and his picture of Martha from the initial story of the book.
- 15) What meaning can you extract from the difficulty to free Kiowa from the waste?
- 16) Examine how the soldiers speak of Kiowa's body. Why do they talk this way?
- 17) What is the paradox and meaning in Norman Bowker's statement: "Nobody's fault . . . . Everybody's" (168).
- 18) Review all the things O'Brien lists that "you could blame" (169-70). What is his critique here? What effect does the repetition and sentence structure have on his purpose?
- 19) Has Jimmy Cross grown since the first story? How is he the same? How is he different?

#### Good Form

- 1) Why is O'Brien's "presence . . . guilt enough"?
- 2) What does O'Brien mean by "story-truth" and "happening-truth"? Does the fact that O'Brien makes up the characters and even events to hit at an emotional truth take away from his message and/or purpose? Why or why not?
- 3) How can O'Brien remain honest to his daughter by answering her question in two different ways?

#### Field Trip

- 1) Consider the title of this story. How is it ironic? What is the connotation of a "field trip," and why is this title significant to the story?
- 2) How does the current appearance of the river where Kiowa died contrast with its appearance during Kiowa's death? Examine the specific images and word choice.
- 3) How does Vietnam still stick with O'Brien 20 years later?
- 4) What perspective does Kathleen's character add to this story? Review her questions and commentary.
- 5) Why does O'Brien want to show his daughter Vietnam and the places he went? Why does he need to bring her along? Do you think this action is appropriate?
- 6) Examine the various juxtapositions of images in this story. How do these juxtapositions contribute to O'Brien's purpose(s)?
- 7) What are some of the emotions O'Brien feels visiting the field?
- 8) The archetype of water appears again in this story. What could it signify at the end of this vignette? What is O'Brien trying to achieve by wading in the water?
- 9) O'Brien wants to say something to honor Kiowa, but he feels as if he had "gone under with Kiowa." What does he mean here?
- 10) What is the purpose of the old man at the end of this story?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

"In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
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Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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## "Ghost Soldiers" and "Night Life"

### Quote by O'Brien:

"War is horrible, yes, but the dirty truth about war is it's also beautiful and seducing. When you're out on an ambush late at night and you feel that quarter moon rising over the nighttime paddies, your whole body is alive with electricity. You're so close to death, you've never been more alive. And that's what proximity to death does to you - it makes you tingle with your own aliveness. You love things you never knew you loved because you're so close to losing it all. Things like a Big Mac and a cold beer and cold sheets and your mom and your dad and the Minnesota Vikings - things you'd always laughed at, you suddenly love them." ([Speech at Brown University](#))

### Essential Terminology:

<b>Gene Autry</b> – An old movie star known for his role in Westerns	<b>DDT</b> – An insecticide that is very potent
<b>Jane Fonda</b> – An American actress and political activist; she was very vocal in protest of the war	<b>Nam</b> – Short for Vietnam
<b>NVA</b> – North Vietnamese Army	<b>Charlie Cong</b> – Another name for the Viet Cong
<b>VC</b> – Viet Cong	<b>Gangrene</b> – Condition where the flesh decays due to a lack of blood flow

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Sinking, Green, Swimming, Luck, Pain, Revenge, Games, Imagination, the Night vs. Day, Cold, Black, Bugs

### Guiding Questions:

#### Ghost Soldiers

- 1) O'Brien finally gets to his part of the story, switching to first person. Why wait this long?
- 2) Why does Rat Kiley almost hug O'Brien?
- 3) Does Bobby Jorgenson deserve the criticism and treatment O'Brien gives him? What purpose does this treatment serve for the author O'Brien?
- 4) How does the line between enemies and friends apply to this chapter?
- 5) How does O'Brien demystify romantic notions of war in this vignette?
- 6) What are some characteristics of Bobby Jorgenson?
- 7) O'Brien "wanted to hurt [Jorgenson]"? Why? How could this connect to something O'Brien is trying to convey about war?
- 8) How could this story be a love story instead of a war story?
- 9) How does O'Brien convey his sense of separateness from his fellow soldiers?
- 10) What role does superstition play in this story? Consider the story about Morty Phillips and O'Brien's descriptions of the night watch.
- 11) What is it that "shifts" inside O'Brien? Explain.
- 12) What different types of pain do O'Brien and others experience? What do these different types of pain express about the characters, the war, etc.?
- 13) Explain the paradox: "I hated him for making me stop hating him" (190).
- 14) How has war changed O'Brien?



- 15) Why does O'Brien go to Azar? What does this indicate about Azar? About the other soldiers?
- 16) Azar says, "Only a game, right?" (192) What's the line between games and war? How does this connect to those who wage war? Consider O'Brien's thoughts: ". . . it felt as if I were gearing up to fight somebody else's war. I didn't have that patriotic seal" (193).
- 17) Who are the ghost soldiers? What does it mean to be a "ghost soldier"?
- 18) Considering the extreme circumstances of the Vietnam War, how can having an active imagination be helpful and/or hurtful? Examine the descriptions O'Brien provides in this story.
- 19) What is the "night" to O'Brien?
- 20) Compare and contrast Azar's actions and attitude versus Mitchel Sanders'.
- 21) Thinking back to "The Things They Carried," what kinds of items – emotional, psychological – are soldiers carrying in this story?
- 22) What is the coldness O'Brien feels inside of him?
- 23) What are the things that "Nam" (Vietnam) does to people?
- 24) How does O'Brien convey the fear Jorgenson feels as a result of Azar and O'Brien's actions?
- 25) Why do you think O'Brien feels closer to Jorgenson after O'Brien scares him?
- 26) Azar takes the "game" further than O'Brien intended. In fact, O'Brien pleads with Azar to stop. What is this "game" for Azar? Why does he take it this far? Examine his actions and the language he uses while interacting with O'Brien.



### Night Life

- 1) Examine the title. How does it connect to the story? What's the connotation of the title "Night Life"?
- 2) How do characters use language to lighten their situations?
- 3) Compare the darkness in this story to darkness in "Ghost Soldiers." What role does darkness play in each?
- 4) How does O'Brien express the changing mentality of Rat Kiley? How does his change express the consequences of Vietnam? Examine the images Rat Kiley sees and the language and details he uses to describe Vietnam and his experience.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "Ghost Soldiers" and "Night Life"

### Steps:

- 1) In groups, select three questions you would like to discuss.
- 2) Individually, write a response to each question. Try to point to specific examples in the text when writing your response.
- 3) When finished, discuss in groups. Afterwards, we will discuss as a class.



Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_ Chapter Title \_\_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

## "The Lives of the Dead"

### Quote by O'Brien:

"The theme of the book *The Things They Carried* ultimately has to do with the things we all carry through our lives. I carried Vietnam with me for a long time, the physical wounds and the spiritual burdens and so on, but so do you. If your parents have been divorced or your boyfriend has just dumped you, um, you know a little bit of what it's like to be in a war. Uh, maybe even a lot. You know what it is to have time just stopped - those late hours on guard when you're just staring into the dark, and you look at your watch and it's 2 am, and you wait an hour and you look again, and it's 2:01, and you wait an hour and you-you know what that is like, and it's a little bit like Vietnam, where the time just went by in little droplets of now-now-now-just forever.

Um, the book was meant to be a bridge between the experiences of all of you, the things you carry through your lives, that I carry through my own - physical burdens but also spiritual, the things we'll all carry to our graves. It was also meant to be an act of honor for the dead, those ghosts in my life, from my past, not just guys in Vietnam, but, you know the little girl who dies at the end of the book, uh, based on a real person. And all of us again, I think, war aside, do carry with us the ghosts of our own history, even the ghosts of ourselves as we were, as you guys were, say, eighteen years ago, that little girl, that little boy, if you were to look into a photograph from way back then and see a little gleam of yourself in that little girl, little boy's eyes, the you is still present, and that person is a ghost inside all of us . . . it was also meant to be a larger metaphor for the things we all carry through our lives." ([Speech at Brown University](#))

### Essential Terminology:

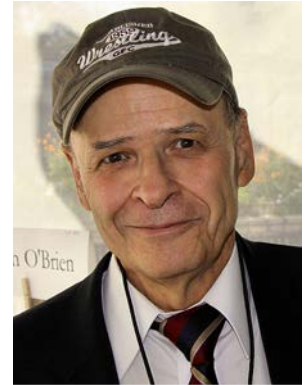
<b>VC</b> – Viet Cong	<b>Napalm</b> – Highly flammable jelly used as a weapon during the war
<b>Mama-san</b> – An elderly Vietnamese lady, usually respected	<b>KIA</b> – Killed in Action

**Motifs/Major Ideas and Objects:** Childhood, Nonverbal Communication, Stories, Time and Memory, Innocence versus Experience, Childhood versus Adulthood, Linda's Red Cap, White, Waste, Light, Dreams and Imagination

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) What does O'Brien mean by "stories can save us"? What does this mean for O'Brien?
- 2) What do you make of the soldier's treatment of the dead old man? What do these actions express about the war? the soldiers? the casualties?
- 3) Explain Kiowa's statement: "Well, you're new here. You'll get used to it"? (215).
- 4) O'Brien connects the old man's death to Linda's. What do you make of this connection? How does it contribute to one of O'Brien's purposes?
- 5) What is O'Brien's attitude towards Linda? What does Linda represent for him?
- 6) What is the function of stories for O'Brien?
- 7) Why does O'Brien go back in time again to events that have already happened and stories with people who have already died? What new layers of meaning do we gain?
- 8) Compare how the soldier's treat the old man who died to how the soldiers treat Tim Lavender's body.

- 9) How can Linda talk to O'Brien after she died? What does O'Brien mean by this?
- 10) Examine the motif of Innocence versus Experience in this story. Consider O'Brien and Linda before and during the war.
- 11) What does "love" mean for O'Brien? What is his "love" for Linda?
- 12) Connect O'Brien's struggles and experiences with Linda and her treatment to O'Brien's struggles and experiences with the Vietnam War.
- 13) What could Nick represent in this story? What purpose does he hold for the story? Can you connect him to other characters in the story? Consider his language towards other characters.
- 14) How has Tim O'Brien remained the same from childhood to adulthood? What does he mean by this?
- 15) Why do you think O'Brien chose Linda's story as the last story of the book? What purpose does this story serve?
- 16) What the role of language, according to O'Brien? Think about how it serves the soldiers and others.
- 17) What's the effect and significance of having O'Brien's childhood perspectives on death added in this story? How does this perspective compare and contrast with his perspectives on the war?
- 18) What's the effect and significance of juxtaposing Linda's death with the deaths of soldiers and others during the war?
- 19) Linda says that being dead is like "being inside a book that nobody's reading" (232). What does this mean? Connect this explanation to the experiences of other soldiers who tried to be heard.
- 20) O'Brien noted that a true war story doesn't end. Does *The Things They Carried* fit this requirement?



*Tim O'Brien as an older man.*



*Tim O'Brien as a young soldier in Vietnam.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "The Lives of the Dead"

### Steps:

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 1: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

Question Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Response 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Question Number: \_\_\_\_

Response 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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# **Find this resource helpful? Here are some others you might find useful for the AP Lang classroom!**

- 1) [AP Lang Argument Activities](#)
- 2) [AP Lang Synthesis Essay Activities and Resources](#)
- 3) [AP Lang Rhetorical Analysis Bundle](#)
- 4) [AP Lang Essays Bundle \(Argument, Synthesis, Rhetorical Analysis\)](#)
- 5) [Embedding Quotes for AP Lang](#)

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***Works cited and valuable resources for information on Tim O’Brien and context on the Vietnam War include the following:***

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