Novel Series

The Things They Carried

teacher resource

TheCenterforLearning

The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

Curriculum Unit
Mary Anne Kovacs
Ruth L. Van Arsdale

TheCenterforLearning

TheCenterforLearning
www.centerforlearning.org

Curriculum Unit Authors

Mary Anne Kovacs, who earned her M.A. at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College, Vermont, is an experienced secondary English teacher. She is also an author and coauthor of numerous curriculum units in The Center for Learning's language arts and novel/drama series, including *Participating in the Poem*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Crucible*.

Ruth L. Van Arsdale, an experienced teacher, earned her master's degree in teaching from Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She has led various workshops on teaching English and has written many Center for Learning novel/drama curriculum units, among them *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

Editor

Tammy Sanderell, B.A.

Cover Design

Amy Giannell, B.S.
Cover illustration of US Vietnam War Helmet © iStockphoto.com/GBlakeley

Copyright © 2012 The Center for Learning, Cleveland, Ohio.
Manufactured in the United States of America.
Printed on recycled paper.

This curriculum unit is a revision of the 2002 edition created by Ruth L. Van Arsdale.

The worksheets in this book may be reproduced for academic purposes only and not for resale. Academic purposes refer to limited use within classroom and teaching settings only.

ISBN 978-1-56077-960-5

Contents

		Page	Handouts
Introduction		v	
Teacher Notes		vii	
Lessons			
1	American Involvement in Vietnam	1	1, 2
2	Soldiers in Alpha Company	9	3, 4
3	Back and Forth in Time	17	5, 6
4	Tim's Dilemma	23	7, 8, 9
5	Friendship and War Stories	29	10, 11, 12
6	The Strange Story of Mary Anne Bell	35	13, 14, 15
7	Life and Death in War	41	16, 17
8	Norman Bowker's Story	47	18, 19
9	Guilt and Responsibility	53	20, 21
10	Concluding Chapters	59	22, 23, 24
11	Focus on Themes	65	25
12	Style in *The Things They Carried*	69	26
Supplementary Materials			
	Reading Guide	72	
	Reading Guide Responses	75	
	Character Quiz: *The Things They Carried*	78	
	Objective Test: *The Things They Carried*	79	
	Answer Keys	83	
	Essay Test	84	

Introduction

Many people consider Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* to be a modern masterpiece. It promises to tell a war story about Vietnam and then draws the reader into the experiences of the characters who people the novel. O'Brien tells their story so well that readers are led to believe that they have known these men personally and that events have been reported accurately. Then readers are confronted with the narrator's admission that he has made the stories up and that story-truth is often more real than happening-truth. Furthermore, the author names his narrator Tim O'Brien, but Tim the narrator is not really Tim the author. For example, in real life, he does not have a daughter Kathleen.

Some have said that, instead of being a novel, this is a series of short stories held together by a common setting and the basic premise that telling the story of life experience keeps both the happening and the people alive. Furthermore, it can release in the person telling the story the tension of bottled-up conflict, anger, and grief. Actually, as the narrator states, stories can save lives. Certainly, they can maintain people's sanity.

The stories cohere to form a novel and present a variety of men from the fictional Alpha Company and their experiences decades ago in a strange war. American involvement in Vietnam was highly controversial, and returning soldiers often felt that their sacrifices and sufferings were not appreciated. O'Brien's book, though neither a justification nor a condemnation of our nation's action, shows graphically what it was like to struggle with being involved. It also shows how different such warfare was from any that our armed services had been engaged in before, for the enemy was hard to distinguish from the civilian, and combat did not consist of what one thinks of when hearing the word *battle*.

The Things They Carried is a fascinating and complex book, one worthy of more than a cursory reading. It is important to reread the stories, taking in not only the physical details but also the deep emotional experience of seeing friends killed, of actually taking the life of another human being, and of being alive after others have died suddenly.

Teacher Notes

The Things They Carried is a great choice for all high school levels, especially for juniors and seniors who are near the ages of the characters. The book, although not simple, is eminently readable, and students usually respond to it enthusiastically. The military terms the narrator uses may at first seem strange, but it is usually fairly easy to define them based on context.

Because of the novel's complex structure, it is a good idea, especially with honors classes, to have students read the entire book before you start to work with it in class. This will give them an overall sense of the characters and the story line; it will also lead to an awareness that analysis and appreciation require rereading to see how deftly Tim O'Brien weaves together the experiences and stories of the men in Alpha Company.

This unit begins by acquainting students with American involvement in the conflict in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Lessons then proceed through the novel step by step according to the following reading schedule.

Reading assignments are as follows:

"The Things They Carried" for Lesson 2

"Love" and "Spin" for Lesson 3

"On the Rainy River" for Lesson 4

"Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell a True War Story," and "The Dentist" for Lesson 5

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" for Lesson 6

"Stockings," "Church," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Style" for Lesson 7

"Speaking of Courage" and "Notes" for Lesson 8

"In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip" for Lesson 9

The remainder of the book for Lesson 10

The novel is filled with anecdotes, some humorous, others devastatingly serious; no attempt is made to analyze all of them, which might deaden students' enthusiasm about the book as a whole.

For Lessons 11 and 12, students need to have read the entire book. Supplemental materials include a reading guide, which can help students to keep a record of what happens when in the novel. You will also find an objective character quiz, an objective test, and questions for an essay test. Lesson 10 suggests an essay as a culminating activity for the study of the novel.

These materials interface well with language arts standards regarding use of textual evidence to support ideas, identification of themes, manipulation of time, and structure. Procedures encourage collaboration. Students may need additional paper to complete some handouts. Answers to handouts will vary unless otherwise indicated.

Lesson 1

American Involvement in Vietnam

Objectives

- To research American involvement in Vietnam
- To understand terms and acronyms used in *The Things They Carried*

Notes to the Teacher

From the beginning, American involvement in Vietnam was controversial and ambiguous. The Cold War was in full swing, so one motivating factor was the desire to stop Communism from spreading throughout Asia. Young American men faced mandatory military service; in reaction to this, some burned draft cards, and others fled to Canada. Conscientious objectors staged demonstrations, and college campuses were sometimes hotbeds of conflict. Men who actually served in Vietnam often felt unappreciated and misunderstood on the home front.

Students are probably aware of conflicts elsewhere in the world, but they are removed from the Vietnam era and may not be acquainted with people who were actually involved in combat or on the sidelines. In this lesson, students begin by researching background information. The Internet will be a useful tool for this. If you have access to people who can give firsthand perspectives—veterans of the armed forces, medical personnel, men who accepted amnesty and returned from Canada, or people who participated in demonstrations on the home front—you may want to invite one or more guest speakers to share experiences with the class. Some of the suggested responses in this lesson come directly from interviews with Vietnam veterans.

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien uses terms and acronyms that were familiar to all of the soldiers in Vietnam. Students conclude the lesson by learning some basic definitions.

Procedure

1. Ask students what they know about the Vietnam War. Conduct a class discussion around their responses.
2. Distribute **Handout 1**, and allow time for students to research the information. Follow with class discussion of their findings.

Suggested Responses

1. Some of the reasons we were there are as follows:
   - "We wanted to save the world from Communism and stop the domino theory of nations in Southeast Asia falling to Communism. I have come to believe that politicians and particularly President Johnson had political purposes. I think LBJ felt that the war would be over quickly, but he soon found out differently. War can be good for the economy, which could be one of the reasons we got into it."—from a radio technical officer stationed in Vietnam
   - "Russian and Chinese Communism were expanding all over the world, and we had experienced their success in Cuba, which was very disheartening. Our intention was to stop any further expansion and to do this by helping Vietnam defend itself and also create a democratic government. We were to be helpers and advisors; they were to do the work. We slowly found ourselves caught up in stopping the onslaught of the Vietcong from the North. The politicians had divided the country much like they did in Korea. North Vietnam and Russia were the key players with the shadow threat of China."—from an Air Force lieutenant colonel
2. This was a difficult war for many reasons, among which were that guerrilla warfare was something with which we did not have experience. In addition, the terrain and climate were challenging; often fighting occurred at night. Furthermore, it was almost impossible for American troops to distinguish enemy forces from the civilian population.
3. Some of the reasons victory was impossible are as follows:
   - "On the part of the U.S. a lot of the war was fought as a police action with strict rules of engagement, and the full force of the U.S. military was never engaged. There had not been an attack on the U.S. (i.e., Pearl Harbor and September 11, 2001), and the heart and soul of the country was not in fighting a war. The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, had been fighting for thirty years, and they were motivated to continue fighting for their homeland, no matter who the opponent was."—the radio technical officer
   - "Our political rules of engagement were no-win policies: South Vietnam was to do it for herself; we could not invade the North; we were to establish a democratic government in an area that didn't know what democracy was. Add a one-sided war to the situation, and it turned into a total disaster!"—the lieutenant colonel

4. Over 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, the majority of them members of the U.S. Army. Many others were maimed or injured. The Vietnam Memorial honors the fallen veterans and has been a special effort to recognize those who served their country without question through a period of great controversy.
5. In the United States, there was widespread antiwar sentiment. It was a time of tremendous moral confusion. Soldiers returning from Vietnam most often were not acclaimed as heroes. They often felt unappreciated, and many suffered forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which at the time was not widely recognized or understood.
6. After American troops were withdrawn, North Vietnam prevailed, and the country is now one of the few Communist nations left in the world. Over time, the country has gradually been rebuilt, and it now has a rapidly growing economy.

3. Point out that people often use terms, abbreviations, and acronyms with the expectation that virtually everyone will know what they mean. We know what it means if NASA is planning a space exploration, if someone gets a DUI, if ACTs are this weekend, and if a student has PE after lunch. Explain that *The Things They Carried* includes a variety of terms that would have been familiar to all of the Americans involved in the conflict in Vietnam.
4. Distribute **Handout 2**, and ask students to complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses

1. *SOP*—standard operating procedure
2. *RTO*—regimental training officer, also radio technical officer
3. *Psy Ops leaflets*—psychological operations (warfare) leaflets
4. *Toe Poppers and Bouncing Betties*—land mines
5. *KIA*—killed in action
6. *MIA*—missing in action
7. *CO*—conscientious objector (one who for religious or other valid reasons was not required to serve)
8. *Willie Peter*—white phosphorous (a form of firepower that ignites easily and quickly)
9. *HE*—high explosive
10. *LP*—long-range patrol
11. *booby-trapped 105 round*—artillery round that proved a dud or misfired, but was set to explode if touched
12. *LZ*—landing zone

13. *AO*—area of operation
14. *NCO*—noncommissioned officer
15. *ARVN*—Armed Republic of Vietnam or Army of the Republic of Vietnam
16. *EM club*—enlisted men's club
17. *C-130*—a large aircraft, cargo plane
18. *VC*—Vietcong
19. *AK-47*—automatic assault rifle
20. *M-16 and M-60*—automatic rifle and machine gun (use the same size shells)
21. *MP*—military police
22. *CID*—intelligence people
23. *Claymore*—a mine
24. *NVA buildup*—North Vietnamese buildup for assault
25. *LZ (Gator)*—landing zone (each had a code name for the location)

5. Assign students to read chapter 1, "The Things They Carried." The chapter is fairly long, so you may want to allow several days for completion of the reading. If you wish, distribute the reading guide in Supplementary Materials to help to focus students' attention.

Vietnam

Directions: Read the following information. Then consult the Internet or other references and, if possible, talk to people involved in the Vietnam War to find answers to the questions.

The Vietnam War remains an enigma to the American people. Some still think that it was a big mistake to become involved as a nation in a ground war in Asia. Others feel that we were justified in trying to help that country to resist Communism and set up a democratic government. Young American men were drafted into the army and sent to Vietnam, where thousands of them died. Others, not qualified as conscientious objectors, fled to Canada, many never to return. Research that period in history, and answer the following questions.

1. What are some of the reasons that the United States became involved in the conflict in Vietnam?

2. Why was this such a difficult situation?

3. Why was this a no-win conflict for the United States?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

4. How many Americans were killed or injured in Vietnam?

5. How were Vietnam veterans treated when they returned home?

6. What happened in Vietnam after American troops withdrew?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Terminology

Directions: *The Things They Carried* uses abbreviations and other terminology, some of which are relatively standard and some that were coined for the Vietnamese conflict. Knowing the meaning of various terms can aid in understanding the novel. Define the following terms in the space provided.

1. SOP

2. RTO

3. Psy Ops leaflets

4. Toe Poppers and Bouncing Betties

5. KIA

6. MIA

7. CO (not a commanding officer in this context)

8. Willie Peter

9. HE

10. LP

11. booby-trapped 105 round

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

12. LZ

13. AO

14. NCO

15. ARVN

16. EM club

17. C-130

18. VC

19. AK-47

20. M-16 and M-60

21. MP

22. CID

23. Claymore

24. NVA buildup

25. LZ (Gator)

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 2

Soldiers in Alpha Company

Objectives

- To understand the purpose of the first chapter in *The Things They Carried*
- To gather information about the characters

Notes to the Teacher

Tim O'Brien peoples his novel with individuals who, in addition to the regular gear of the foot soldier, carry items, mementos, and psychological and emotional baggage. The first chapter introduces many of them and reverberates with phrases about "the things they carried." It also builds up a great deal of tension; these men, not much older than the students reading about them, were enmeshed in unremitting danger and tedium. In this lesson, students first answer questions to organize what they learned in the opening chapter.

Students then focus on characters. Several of the men stand out vividly in this first chapter; the narrator is only a voice in the background. It later becomes clear that he is telling about events that happened years ago when he was a soldier in Vietnam. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, only twenty-four years old, was in charge and took seriously the responsibility of keeping his men alive; he was also distracted by his attraction to Martha, a college student back home in America. Ted Lavender is the first G.I. that we see die; we also learn that he self-medicated heavily with tranquilizers. We see that Kiowa, a committed Christian, carries a New Testament, a hatchet, and moccasins with him everywhere. Other members of the platoon also begin to emerge as distinct individuals. We hear of the many things the men carried: photographs, letters, a girlfriend's pantyhose, a desiccated thumb, pocket knives, water, weapons, diseases, fear, and much more. In some ways, the first chapter is like a litany of people, objects, and weights. After sharing insights into the opening chapter, students begin to differentiate the soldiers from one another. Finally, they respond in writing to a prompt.

Procedure

1. Ask students to share general responses to the opening chapter. Note that it is fairly lengthy, presents quite a few characters, and is filled with details about the things, both physical and less tangible, that the men carried with them in Vietnam.

2. Point out the paragraph that dedicates the book to the military company. Explain that it gives the book an immediate quality and imparts a sense of authority to the author/narrator.
3. Distribute **Handout 3**, and ask small groups to complete it.

Suggested Responses

1. The men carried necessities, weapons, letters, pictures, talismans, illnesses, parasites, fear, and many other burdens. Enumerating items gives individuality to characters. The men were soldiers with a common mission, but they were also people from different backgrounds who had different problems, hopes, and personalities.
2. A *grunt* is a foot soldier; to *hump* is to carry something and also to march.
3. Ted Lavender's death is ironic because he was carrying twenty pounds of ammunition but could not use any of it; he also used tranquilizers and drugs to keep him from worrying, but they made him so mellow that he failed to be on guard. The complete suddenness of the death astounded the other men.
4. Lieutenant Cross was a young man who took responsibility very seriously and who cared about the men under his leadership. He felt guilty because he was daydreaming about Martha when Lavender was killed. We see his pain and frustration in the burning of the letters and the photographs, as well as his determination to do a better job of leadership.
5. The thumb seems to have been Norman Bowker's somewhat macabre good-luck charm, like Dave Jensen's rabbit's foot. The narrator points out that Bowker was a gentle person.
6. The men never seemed to encounter an enemy face to face and were often not really sure who the enemy was. There were no victories or defeats, just endless marches. Terrifying attacks reduced the men to abject and helpless fear, but there were no definite outcomes.
7. The government sent fresh food and necessities but also seemingly frivolous supplies from the abundance of the United States to soldiers in a poverty-stricken country.
8. Martha cannot possibly have known what things were really like in Vietnam, the real world in which Lieutenant Cross was involved. In contrast, her life seemed unreal to him.

9. Ted Lavender's death was difficult for Kiowa to process right away, for suddenly a living person was gone. He knew that he should have felt sad, but actually, he was more aware of being pleased to be alive and able to use his five senses to experience everything around him.
10. The heaviest burden was cowardice, the desire to run and hide. In fact, men sometimes died because they were too embarrassed to show their fear.
11. The narrator at first appears to be an omniscient voice; this is not clarified until the subsequent chapter.
12. The first chapter has a feeling of cascading tension. Details evoke readers' interest in individual soldiers. The repetitions of objects carried and weights make the chapter almost like an incantation.

4. Point out that there were seventeen men in the platoon, including Ted Lavender, but we do not meet all of them as individuals in the opening chapter. Distribute **Handout 4**, and have small groups complete the chart.

Suggested Responses

1. Norman Bowker is described as a gentle man who carried a desiccated thumb as a talisman. He kept a diary, which suggests a reflective, introspective personality. Later the book reveals the war's devastating effect on him.
2. At this point, it would be easy to think that Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is the protagonist. At the time, he was twenty-four and very attached to Martha, a college junior back home. He carried her letters, photos, and a pebble she sent to him. He was devastated by Ted Lavender's death and blamed himself; he clearly had a strong sense of personal responsibility.
3. Henry Dobbins was a big man; he used his girlfriend's pantyhose as a talisman and wrapped them around his neck for luck. This adds a humorous image to the novel.
4. Dave Jensen seems to have been very health-conscious; he carried a rabbit's foot.
5. Rat Kiley was the medic; he carried a lot of things, including comic books.
6. Kiowa was from Oklahoma; he carried a New Testament, moccasins, and a feathered hunting hatchet. He was bowled over by Ted Lavender's death and struggled to come to terms with its reality. He needed to talk things out, and he was profoundly aware of being glad that he was not the one dead.

7. Ted Lavender is the first G.I. whose death the book describes. He took tranquilizers and used marijuana. The narrator emphasizes Lavender's fear.
8. Mitchell Sanders was an officer and the one who cut off the thumb Bowker carries. He was prone to see morals in things that happen.
9. Lee Strunk was the one who drew tunnel duty; he carried a slingshot.

5. Encourage students to pay special attention to these men as the book goes on and to use the handout to record additional information.
6. Remind students that the narrator describes the men as "too frightened to be cowards." Point out the paradoxical nature of the statement, and ask students to reflect in writing about what it means and whether it can be true in everyday life as well as in high-tension settings like Vietnam. Allow students about ten minutes to respond to the prompt in writing. Collect results as tickets out of class.
7. Assign students to read the chapters "Love" and "Spin." You may want to alert them to watch for ways that the narrator manipulates time.

Chapter 1: "The Things They Carried"

Directions: Answer the following questions to clarify your understanding.

1. What did the men carry? What is the point of enumerating the minor things that individuals added to their packs?

2. Define *grunt* and *hump* as they are used in this story.

3. What ironies do you detect in Ted Lavender's death?

4. What do we learn about Lieutenant Cross?

5. What is ironic about the item that Norman Bowker carried?

6. Study the passages in the story that describe the scenes of fighting. What do they reveal?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

7. What is ironic about the supplies that the troops continually got from the U.S. government?

8. What did Lieutenant Cross mean when he thought that Martha belonged in a world that was not quite real?

9. Why did Kiowa want to talk about Ted Lavender's death? What is the dilemma he found when he thought about it?

10. What does the narrator say was the heaviest burden of all?

11. What is the point of view? Who is telling this story?

12. Describe the effect of the first chapter on you as a reader.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Soldiers in Vietnam

Directions: In order to see the various characters as real people, record information revealed in the opening chapter, and add details as they unfold throughout the story. Even those whose deaths are described early are further revealed through the references made about them by other people. Additional characters also emerge quite clearly later in the book.

Character	Chapter 1	The Rest of the Story
1. Norman Bowker		
2. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross		
3. Henry Dobbins		
4. Dave Jensen		

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

 Name:

Character	Chapter 1	The Rest of the Story
5. Rat Kiley		
6. Kiowa		
7. Ted Lavender		
8. Mitchell Sanders		
9. Lee Strunk		

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 3

Back and Forth in Time

Objectives

- To understand characters and events in the second and third chapters
- To identify the use of comic relief
- To reflect on the nature of storytelling

Notes to the Teacher

"Love" is a short chapter that serves several important functions. We see that this is a first-person narration that is being delivered decades after the conflict in Vietnam. The immense tension of the first chapter is eased as two men talk about their shared past. We also learn more of the story of Jimmy Cross's hopeless love for Martha. "Spin" puts us back in Vietnam, mentions Curt Lemon and Azar, and tells a little more about the men's lives.

Students may be surprised at the characters' uses of humor. They devised jokes, sometimes macabre ones, to deal with the intensity of their experiences. This is sometimes referred to as gallows humor. It provides comic relief. By making a joke out of something, we diminish its power to scare us. The men fighting in Vietnam were in their late teens or early twenties and could erupt into playfulness when the opportunity came for them to relax. The jokes also helped to maintain macho facades.

In this lesson, students first discuss characters and events in "Love" and "Spin." They note the soldiers' uses of humor to cope. Finally, they discuss the nature of storytelling, a vital concern in the novel. The optional activity at the end is derived from the narrator's comments about the photographs that he and Jimmy Cross looked at.

Procedure

1. Ask students how the second and third chapters relate to the first. (The second chapter is very short and leaps forward in time so that the war seems to have happened a long time ago. The chapter is calm. It shows that the book actually has a first-person narrator. When he gives other characters' thoughts, he must be surmising them or repeating what was said to him. The third chapter goes back in time to Vietnam but for the most part stresses lighter moments.)

2. Distribute **Handout 5**, and have small groups discuss the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. The first-person narrator is an army veteran who was part of the platoon described in the first chapter. He is now a writer.
2. Both men survived the war and have gone on with their lives, but they are still bothered by things that happened in Vietnam. They both feel a kind of fondness of the young men they see in the old pictures. We hear a little more of the Martha story—her work as a missionary and her distaste for male sexuality.
3. There is humor in Mitchell Sanders sending body lice to his draft board and in comments about Ted Lavender's mellow war; Rat Kiley made up a silly rhyme about watching out for land mines. There is a slapstick moment in the rain dance that Kiowa taught to Rat Kiley and Dave Jensen.
4. A checkers game is a kind of war, but one that has a clear field, definite players, and firm rules, unlike the conflict in which the men were engaged. The checkers game was a relief.
5. We hear the name Curt Lemon, and we hear about Azar. We see Azar's kindness to a child and his wanton cruelty to a puppy, as well as his attempt to make a joke of it. The puppy also adds to our view of Lavender, who must have had a soft and caring side to his personality.
6. Norman Bowker's father's enthusiasm about medals was a serious burden to the young man.
7. Mitchell Sanders did not explain the moral of the story. It just did not seem right to be so peaceful. Perhaps returning to duty was the only manly thing to do.

3. Point out that the novel is concerned with the conflict in Vietnam, but it also has other concerns. One of these is storytelling. The narrator, years after the war, is a writer, and he places a great value on stories. Distribute **Handout 6**, and ask students to complete it individually.

Suggested Responses

1. This can vary enormously. If students seem intrigued, you might want to have volunteers bring the stories to class, read them, and lead discussions of why the stories matter.
2. Stories are a way of explaining the phenomena that surround us and a way of providing entertainment.

3. Fiction and nonfiction seem like opposites but, in fact, overlap. Every fiction is created from bits of reality, and every nonfiction is tinted by the viewpoint of the storyteller. Notice, for example, how eyewitness stories can vary; not all of the versions can be accurate.
4. The narrator's daughter says that he is obsessed with telling stories about the war. She would rather have him write happy fairy tales. Her view is that of a child, inexperienced with life's realities. The narrator has seen too much reality to indulge in fantasies.
5. The narrator says that the stories he tells begin somewhere in his past and then unfold in various ways. Stories join the past to the future (reminding us of the pebble that Martha sent to the lieutenant). Stories are good for a time of reflection, when one can think about influences that have made people what they are. Finally, stories last, refreshing the memory about what happened and letting others know about experiences.

4. Assign students to read "On the Rainy River." You might want to allow several days for this assignment. Ask them to decide whether they think the narrator of the story made a good or a bad decision at the end.

Optional Activity

Have students look again at the narrator's comments about looking through old pictures at the beginning of "Love." Ask them to collect a set of old photographs of themselves and friends or relatives, to mount them on art paper, and to write reflections about the much younger faces they see.

Name:

"Love" and "Spin"

Directions: Use the following questions to clarify your understanding.

1. What does "Love" reveal about the novel's point of view?

2. What does the chapter reveal about Jimmy Cross and Tim O'Brien?

3. During moments of great tension, people often use comic relief in attempts to cope and reduce anxiety. What incidents in "Spin" provide comic relief?

4. What is the significance of the description of the checkers games played by Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins?

5. Are any new characters mentioned? What do we learn about them?

6. What is the significance of Bowker's comments about medals?

7. Mitchell Sanders told a story about an AWOL soldier. Does the story have a moral?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Storytelling

Directions: A central concern in *The Things They Carried* is the nature, purpose, and value of storytelling. This topic begins to emerge at the end of the second chapter and in the third chapter. Use the following questions to consider the role that stories play in your life and what Tim O'Brien has to say about them.

1. What stories did you enjoy as a child? Why did you like them?

2. All ancient cultures produced myths and legends. Why?

3. How does fiction differ from nonfiction? How are the two genres alike?

4. What does the narrator's daughter have to say about his stories? Is she correct?

5. At the end of "Spin," the author gives reasons for writing stories. List some purposes that stories can serve.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 4

Tim's Dilemma

Objectives

- To learn the history of military conscription in the United States
- To understand the nature of dilemmas
- To analyze "On the Rainy River"
- To gain insight into the importance of point of view

Notes to the Teacher

"On the Rainy River" is a carefully written, gripping story of a young man who faces a true dilemma in a life-changing situation. It reveals a lot about the narrator's essential character and personality. Young people today may find it hard to envision an America in which joining the military was not a matter of free choice. Like thousands of other young men, Tim received his draft notice and found himself with only two viable options: the army or an escape to Canada.

It is obvious that he is intelligent; complete scholarships to Harvard do not come easily. He was a writer. He did not resist hard work; his summer job was far from pleasant. He was serious and against, but not fanatical about, the war in Vietnam. He loved his family, and he wanted others to respect him.

In this lesson, students learn some facts about the military draft in the history of the United States. They consider the difficulty of dilemmas, and they analyze "On the Rainy River." Finally, they complete a creative writing assignment involving a shift in point of view.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 7**, and ask students to read the information. Conduct an open-ended discussion based on responses to the agree/disagree statements.
2. Ask students to define the word *dilemma* (a situation in which all of one's available choices seem to be bad ones). Provide examples to clarify. (A person is on a boat that has caught on fire and is in the middle of shark-infested waters far from land. A person who has been arrested for embezzling company funds can either face trial and imprisonment or abandon friends and family to seek asylum somewhere far away. A person can either fail chemistry or risk getting caught cheating in the final exam.) Explain that sometimes dilemmas are

only apparent; the person has just failed to consider alternatives. In a true dilemma, all of the available options seem negative.

3. Ask students to identify the narrator's dilemma in "On the Rainy River." (He could report for military training and duty, almost certainly in Vietnam; he could abandon his family and friends and incur their disapproval and scorn by escaping to Canada. There was no other option for him—deferments were unavailable, he did not qualify as a conscientious objector, and there were long waiting lists for other military venues.)
4. Point out that "On the Rainy River" can stand as an independent short story about a young person not a whole lot older than a student is just after college graduation—a person with an important decision to make. A lot was at stake.
5. Distribute **Handout 8**, and have students complete it.

Suggested Responses

1. The narrator is Tim O'Brien; the main character is Tim as a young man who just graduated with honors from college and had a great scholarship for graduate work. The narrator seems to be honest about everything he remembers.
2. Tim seems to have been intelligent, serious, hardworking, emotional, and perhaps somewhat introverted. The draft notice scared and outraged him.
3. He was filled with so much emotion and inner conflict that he actually became sick. His feelings included a lot of rage and some self-pity.
4. Tim's parents and siblings were present in his mind, but very minor in the story, as are the other inhabitants of his hometown. The significant minor character is Mr. Berdahl, who managed to provide the nonintrusive companionship that Tim desperately needed.
5. The setting is 1968 in Minnesota, first his hometown, then a rural area right on the Canadian border. The Vietnam war dominated the nation's media and was a highly controversial subject; the military draft was in full force.
6. The draft letter set the person vs. self conflict into motion. The story climaxes with Tim's inability to make himself leap off the boat and swim to the Canadian shoreline.
7. Sometimes people cannot make themselves do things they believe they ought to do.

6. Point out that Tim says that Mr. Berdahl saved his life. Ask students to explain what he means. (At the time, Tim was distraught and emotionally out of control. Mr. Berdahl provided a place where no one intruded on privacy or decision-making. Anything else would have sent young Tim into flight mode.)
7. Read aloud the passages about five pages before the end of the story in which Tim the narrator insists that readers put themselves into his place; there were no easy answers in the situation. Glib responses need reconsideration.
8. Ask students if they think Tim made the right decision at the end. (He seems to have been incapable of choosing the alternative. He believes that he made the wrong decision; we do not have to agree. There were no good options.)
9. Distribute **Handout 9**, and have students read the directions. Allow time for individuals or partners to draft stories from the alternative perspectives. Encourage students to use the text to get a sense of the actual voices of the characters they choose. Have students share their writings.
10. Assign students to read "Enemies," "Friends," "How to Tell a True War Story," and "The Dentist."

The Military Draft in the United States

Part A.

Directions: Read the following information.

The United States Constitution (article 1, section 8) gives Congress the authority to raise and support military forces. Over the years, members of the military have included both enlisted personnel and draftees.

There is a long tradition of the expectation that all men in reasonably good health should be willing to participate in combat when necessary. In the early colonies, all young men were trained for the militias used for defense. The colonies mandated military service during the Revolutionary War. A national draft was used for the first time during the Civil War.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Selective Service Act of 1917, and men were drafted into military duty. This act ended the next year with the conclusion of the war. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act of 1940. Men were drafted into the army for World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Registering for selective service was suspended in 1975 but reinstated in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter. The draft is intended to fill vacancies in the army when there are not enough volunteers. All men are still required to register as soon as they turn eighteen. Since 1980, all members of the military have been people who enlisted voluntarily, but the actual draft has been suspended, not abolished. It has always been a controversial topic.

Part B.

Directions: Indicate whether you agree (A) or disagree (D) with each of the following statements.

_____1. If America is involved in a war, all healthy young men should be required to join a branch of the military.

_____2. An army that consists of people who are there against their will is worse than no army at all.

_____3. Military draft is a violation of a person's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

_____4. Women as well as men should be required to register for the Selective Service System.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

"On the Rainy River" as a Short Story

Directions: Consider this chapter of the novel as an independent piece of short fiction. Analyze its elements.

1. Who is the narrator? Who is the main character? How reliable is the point of view?

2. What seem to have been Tim's dominant qualities when he was a young man?

3. What thoughts and emotions did the protagonist experience?

4. Who are the minor characters in the story? How important are they?

5. What is the setting? How important is it to what happens?

6. What set the conflict into motion? Where does the story line climax?

7. What is the story's theme?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Considerations about Point of View

Directions: People often underestimate the importance of point of view. "On the Rainy River" is told totally from the perspective of Tim. We witness his emotional turbulence, and we hear his thoughts about the United States in 1968. Consider the following narrative options. Then select one, and write a short story using that point of view.

1. How would Mr. Berdahl describe his experience with Tim? At the time, he was eighty-one years old but still vigorous in both body and mind. He lived alone in the wilderness. How would his view of Tim have changed from their first encounter to their meals and work together? What would he have thought as he witnessed Tim's internal struggle in the boat?

2. Like Tim, the other soldiers in Vietnam also had their own stories to tell. The opening chapters of the novel provide quite a lot of information about Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, all from the point of view of Tim, who surmises the officer's thoughts and feelings. What would Jimmy Cross say about his college years, the reasons why he was in Vietnam, and how he got there?

3. Ted Lavender's death is described in the opening chapter, but we learn enough about him to get a sense of his personality. How do you imagine his life before the army and Vietnam? How did he end up in a place that terrified him? How would he have described his thoughts, feelings, and experiences?

4. Kiowa's background is very different from those of the other men. How do you visualize his life back in Oklahoma? How did he end up in the army in Vietnam? Why did he bring the moccasins and the hatchet with him? Do you think he was as resentful as Tim? How would he have told his story?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 5

Friendship and War Stories

Objectives

- To understand the characterizations of Dave Jensen, Lee Strunk, and Curt Lemon
- To analyze Tim O'Brien's discussion of the nature of war stories

Notes to the Teacher

"Enemies," "Friends," and "The Dentist" are all very short chapters that serve as vignettes to present characters. We learn more about Lee Strunk, Dave Jensen, and Curt Lemon. Two more members of Alpha Company—Lee Strunk and Curt Lemon—die. In this lesson, students begin by focusing on those three chapters.

"How to Tell a War Story" is longer and more complicated. Here Tim the narrator, Tim the character, Tim the writer, and Tim the war veteran seem to merge in an effort to communicate about the real nature of humans involved in war. War stories involve an essential irony: if an event seems believable, it probably did not happen; if an event seems totally unbelievable, it probably did.

For procedure 5, you will need a clip from a war movie such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Platoon*. These films (along with many other films that deal with war) are rated R, so be sure to preview any clips before showing them in class.

Procedure

1. Point out that people under a lot of pressure sometimes do destructive things that seem irrational and pointless. Tim O'Brien repeatedly reminds us that Alpha Company consisted of very young men—all late teens or early twenties—living in a combination of constant boredom and danger. Ask students for examples of these men acting out in destructive ways. (Killing the animals in villages had very little to do with defeating the Vietcong. Students are often appalled—as the other soldiers were—by Azar's pointless act of killing the puppy. Rat Kiley's anguish over his friend's death leads him to torture the baby water buffalo.)
2. Ask students why Tim O'Brien included these incidents in the book. (War is not a condition likely to bring out the best in people. Surrounded by violence, people become violent.) Ask students whether feeling sorry for the animals is mere sentimentality in light of the fact that humans were shot in the head, dismembered, and blown up into treetops.

3. Distribute **Handout 10**, and have small groups discuss the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. The fight resulted more from a need to vent tension than from the missing knife, and it could easily have become a fight to death. Later the two men actually became buddies. The relationship was ambivalent.
2. By breaking his own nose, Dave Jensen hoped to avoid retribution by Lee Strunk.
3. The two men made a pact that if either was badly wounded, perhaps wheelchair bound, the other would find a way to end his buddy's life. It is easy to make this choice as a hypothetical situation. When Lee Strunk's leg was shot off, he did not want to die, and Dave Jensen did not want to kill him. The story stresses the enormous power of the desire to live, something that comes up over and over in the novel.
4. Jensen had the consolation of knowing he did not break the pact.
5. Tim the narrator admits that he did not really like Curt Lemon. "The Dentist" is intended to reveal something of the man's personality and character.
6. Curt Lemon tended to be braggart and a showoff. He feared the dentist more than the Vietcong, and passing out was an embarrassment, which he also hated. His action in confronting both the dentist and his own fear is another example of showing off, which we can either admire and enjoy or scorn.

4. Point out that "How to Tell a True War Story" combines narrative, essay, and poetic approaches in one piece. Curt Lemon's spectacular death is at the core, but we also have a kind of lecture on the nature of war and war stories. Point out the contrast between the deaths of Lavender and Lemon. (Ted Lavender was shot in the head and fell like a stone; Curt Lemon accidentally stepped on a booby-trapped artillery round and was literally blown up; his body parts flew up into the trees.)
5. Show a clip from a war movie, and conduct an open-ended discussion about whether Tim O'Brien would classify it as true.
6. Distribute **Handout 11**, and have students discuss the characteristics. Make the following clarifications:
   - A true war story does not lead to profound insights about the dignity of human beings or the beauty of life.
   - It clouds reality with fantasy; it is hard to know what really happened.

- It includes improbable (even impossible) events.
- It is likely to seem tedious, as if it will never end.
- It appeals to gut reactions more than to intellectual inquiry.
- It may lead the reader to say, "So what?"

7. Distribute **Handout 12**, and have small groups try to complete the analysis of Mitchell Sanders's story and determine whether it qualifies as a true war story.

Suggested Responses

1. This was a reconnaissance mission. The men were sent to gather information.
2. The men were just supposed to look and listen; they were not supposed to talk. This meant that they were all forced into their own thoughts and emotions.
3. There was a dense fog, and everything was eerie and strange. Because the men were not allowed to talk, they could not compare perceptions. Their imaginations seem to have run wild.
4. The men heard strange music, voices, sounds as if there was a party, and chanting.
5. After days of this, the men snapped and ordered a full-scale assault on the area. Later they could not or would not explain what happened.
6. In the story, there is no division between reality and imagination; it is impossible to tell what is real. Certainly, much of it is unbelievable (so it might be true). There is no resolution—just an all-out attack on what might not even have been there. We can feel the eeriness of the patrol duty and the men's rising panic, but it is not possible to analyze the story. Sanders thought he found a meaning—people's failure to really listen—but he was expressing his own frustration more than the experience of the patrol. The story is not about war as much as it is about fear, uncertainty, and panic. It is a real war story.

8. Assign "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," and direct students to think about whether it qualifies as a real war story.

"Enemies," "Friends," and "The Dentist"

Directions: Use the following questions as springboards to discuss these short chapters.

1. How would you describe the relationship between Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk?

2. What did Dave Jensen gain by breaking his own nose?

3. What is the significance of the pact between Jensen and Strunk?

4. Why did Strunk's death relieve Jensen of an enormous weight?

5. We hear almost nothing about Curt Lemon before the chapter entitled "How to Tell a True War Story," where his death is described. Why does the narrator tell us more about Lemon in "The Dentist"?

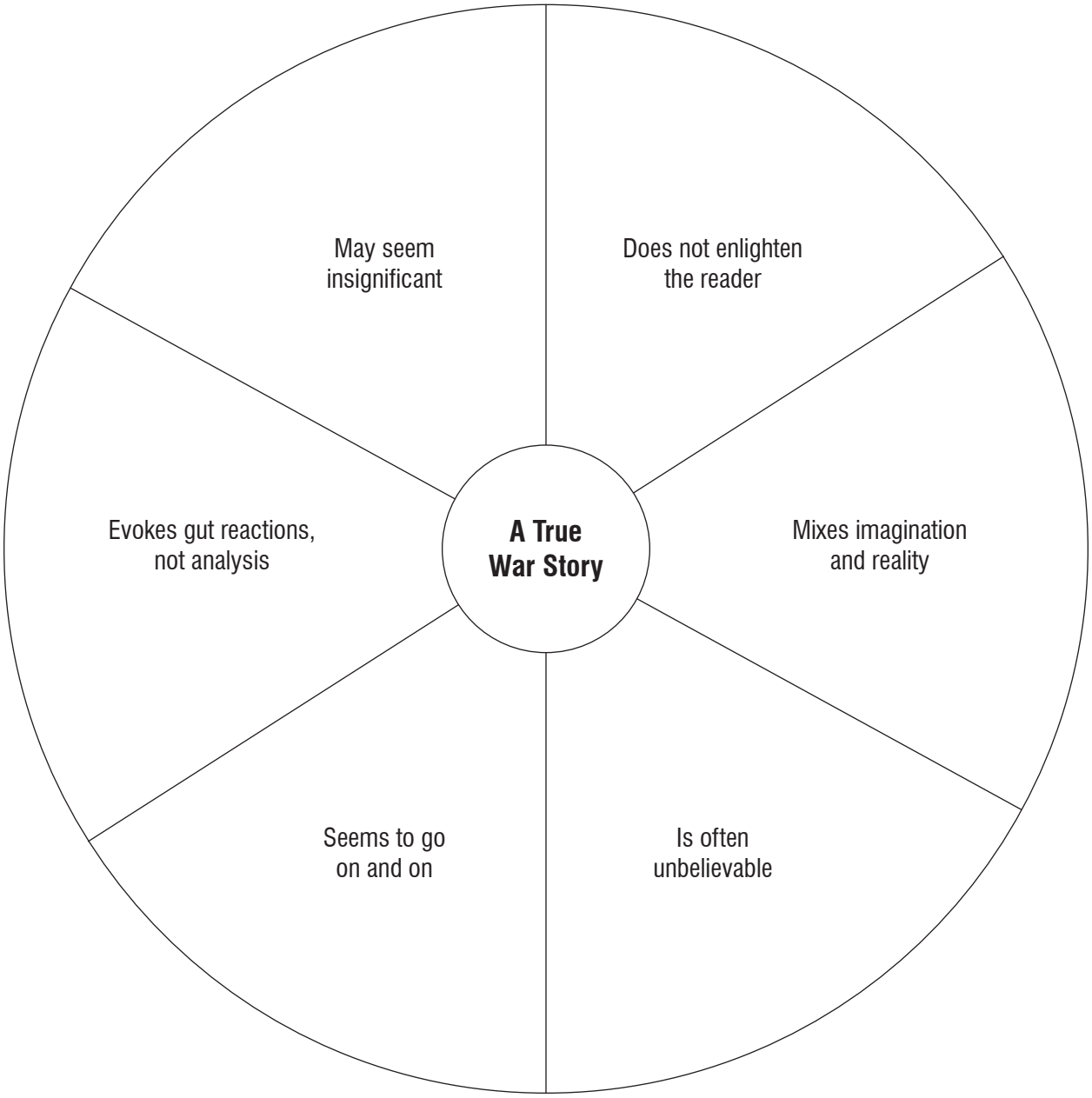
6. Based on "The Dentist," how would you describe Curt Lemon? Do you agree with Rat Kiley or with Tim O'Brien?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Name:

A True War Story

Directions: Examine some of the characteristics of what Tim O'Brien sees as a true war story.



© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Music in the Mountains

Directions: Reread Mitchell Sanders's story about the six-man patrol in the mountains, and answer the following questions.

1. What was the purpose of the mission?

2. What did the six men have to do?

3. What was the atmosphere like?

4. What did the men experience?

5. What did the men do?

6. According to Tim O'Brien's criteria, is this a real war story? Explain.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 6

The Strange Story of Mary Anne Bell

Objectives

- To decide whether this chapter meets the requirements of a true war story
- To investigate the effect of Mary Anne on the men and of Vietnam on Mary Anne
- To understand Mary Anne as a reflection of the archetypal all-goddess figure

Notes to the Teacher

The story of Mary Anne Bell is strange and unexpected in the midst of a novel about men involved in combat in Vietnam. It is impossible to believe it—but then, we have been warned that, in war stories, what seems impossible probably did really happen. Perhaps that is why this episode occurs near the center of the novel. It reads like a myth or a legend.

Rat Kiley, known for wild exaggeration, tells the story. Mark Fossie, a medic, sent word for his girlfriend, a seventeen-year-old from Ohio, to come to him in Vietnam. She arrived as a naïve girl, madly in love, but soon became interested in the work the medics did and in her surroundings. It appears that something deep in her nature responded to Vietnam, to the point that she felt happier than ever before in her life. She began going on stealthy missions with Green Berets. Eventually, she went off on her own and supposedly was spotted or imagined in various remote places.

One way to approach literature involves keen awareness of archetypes, super-symbols that echo ancient myths and legends. One prominent archetype, sometimes referred to as the all-goddess, stretches back to figures like Isis, Athena, and Artemis. The all-goddess is associated as much with war and hunting as with home and hearth; she can be fierce and murderous. Another prominent archetype involves the heroic quest pattern of journey and discovery.

In this lesson, students first discuss the story. They then relate it to the archetypes.

Procedure

1. Begin with a brief brainstorming in which students share reactions to "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Then distribute **Handout 13**, and ask students to complete it individually. Follow with large group discussion. Students might make the following comments:

- Mark Fossie was young and in love; he probably also wanted to show off. The notion that he might try to get his girlfriend over to what seemed like a reasonably safe place is believable and reflects the kind of risk often taken by young people.
- Mary Anne seems to have been programmed into an American Dream of a fancy house, husband, family, and life happily ever after. In Vietnam, she discovered aspects of her true self that might have lain dormant forever.
- Mary Anne thought she loved Mark until she learned more about herself.
- No actual damage was done; the visit took Mary Anne out of the compound and into the reality of Vietnam.
- It probably helped that she was pretty, outgoing, and helpless. To men along the way, she would have been a novelty.
- Mary Anne's comradeship with the Green Berets seems unlikely. Even the medics were wary of them.
- Mark knew the Mary Anne that lived in Cleveland Heights and dated him; she changed.
- Rat Kiley's statement that he and all of the other men loved Mary Anne suggests that there is some factual base to the story. How much is open to debate.

2. Distribute **Handout 14**, and ask small groups to discuss the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. Everything about Mary Anne was incongruous—blonde, rosy-faced, dressed sometimes in jeans and a swimsuit top, sometimes in white culottes and a pink sweater. Nothing could be more remote from camouflage attire.
2. The men appreciated looking at Mary Anne; she probably reminded them of girls back home. There must have been some feelings of lust and jealousy.
3. The men were respectful.
4. Mary Anne was friendly and outgoing, flirtatious in an innocent way, and she giggled a lot. She spent most of her time with Mark but also saw the other men at meals and joined them in playing volleyball. Sometimes she liked to dance.
5. The two were longtime sweethearts—since sixth grade. They planned to marry, live in a nice house on Lake Erie, have three beautiful children, and be together through old age to death. Apparently, the dream began to seem less compelling and attractive.

6. Mary Anne wanted to see the village; she worked alongside the medics. She stopped giggling and began to seem less at ease with the relationship with Mark. She often stared out at the mountains.
7. Vietnam's effect on Mary Anne is mysterious and difficult to articulate but can be sensed viscerally. She felt supremely happy. The idea of a delightful suburban life faded as a wildness, even a savagery, in her grew.

3. Point out that we hear only rumors about what actually happened to Mary Anne. Have small groups create original scenarios that tell the rest of her story. Then share ideas as a whole class. (Would it have been possible for her to return to Ohio? Did she marry a Green Beret or a member of the Vietcong? Did she spend all of her time alone?)
4. Point out that "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is like a legend or a myth. It is rooted in the oral tradition, and it has universal elements. Mary Anne Bell is actually a mythic figure. Distribute **Handout 15**. Ask students to read the information and complete the writing. Follow with discussion. (Rat Kiley indicates that Mary Anne Bell was very attractive, but also big-boned and wide-shouldered. By the end, she is as adept at warfare as any Green Beret, as dangerous and ready for the kill as any wild animal. She did embark on the long journey from northern Ohio to Vietnam. Once there, she changed dramatically as a result of her experiences and, instead of having a family and house on Lake Erie, became a denizen of the mountains and forests.)
5. Assign students to read "Stockings," "Church," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Style."

Do You Believe That?

Directions: The extraordinary story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is set near the center of the book and is probably the one hardest to believe or to explain in rational terms. Respond to each of the following statements, and be ready to give reasons for your ideas.

1. Mark Fossie's idea of bringing his seventeen-year-old girlfriend to Vietnam is completely unbelievable.

2. Going to Vietnam was the best thing that Mary Anne ever did for herself.

3. Mary Anne never really loved Mark.

4. The visit to the nearby village was a big mistake.

5. No seventeen-year-old girl could make it from Cleveland Heights to a remote area of Vietnam on her own.

6. The story is believable up until Mary Anne's first night excursion with the Green Berets.

7. Mark may have dated Mary Anne for quite a few years, but he really did not know her.

8. Consider the source. Rat Kiley was known to exaggerate wildly. There may be a germ of truth in the story, but the rest is fabrication.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Mary Anne, the Medics, and Vietnam

Directions: Use the following questions to investigate the impact Mary Anne must have had on the men in Vietnam and the effect Vietnam had on her.

1. What was incongruous about Mary Anne's appearance at the medical base?

2. The men had been away from home for a long time. How do you think Mary Anne's appearance affected them?

3. There is no indication that any of the other medics tried to take advantage of Mark Fossie's girlfriend. What does this say about them?

4. When Mary Anne first arrived, what seem to have been her main personality and character traits?

5. What future plans did Mary Anne and Mark have? Why did she abandon those plans?

6. What are some of the indications of changes in Mary Anne's personality and intentions?

7. How would you describe the effect of Vietnam on Mary Anne? Is that effect in any way believable?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

A Look at Archetypes

Directions: Read the information, and complete the writing assignment.

Archetypes are sometimes described as super-symbols. They transcend time and place and emerge in amazingly similar forms in legends and myths all over the world. Psychologists view them as built-in elements of the human psyche.

For example, all ancient cultures include powerful female figures, both goddesses and humans, and these women have much in common. They are attractive, often seductive, and powerful. They are also fierce, sometimes associated with snakes or lions. They are hunters, and they go into battle readily. You might be familiar with some of them—Athena and Artemis from classical Greece, Egypt's Isis, Babylon's Ishtar, and, in much more recent history, Joan of Arc.

Another important archetype, sometimes referred to as the monomyth, is the hero. Typically, the hero, a larger-than-life figure, embarks on a journey that requires bravery and involves confrontations with terrifying creatures. The outcome is personal transformation. Sometimes the hero returns home with wisdom to share. Other times, the hero sets off in an entirely new direction.

"The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" emerges as a legend, passed on by word of mouth, probably part fact, part imagination. Write a paragraph explaining how it reflects either archetype.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 7

Life and Death in War

Objectives

- To understand characters and events in the chapters from "Stockings" through "Style"
- To analyze the importance of the story about the killing of the young Vietnamese soldier

Notes to the Teacher

These chapters reveal more about some of the men we have been following closely. There is humor in Henry Dobbins's confidence in the magic in the pantyhose; Kiowa's religious commitment is evident, as is his capacity for friendship and understanding. Azar clearly had no sense of limits.

By far the most important part of this section of the novel is the story of the narrator killing the young Vietnamese man. There is a blend of fact and fiction here, and later the narrator will assert that he did not actually kill the man. Certainly, it would have been impossible for Tim the narrator to know about the man's interest in math, college education, fear of combat, and girlfriend. The story centers on the reality of death and human reactions to it. The details emphasize that the man was not just an abstract enemy, but a complex human being.

In this lesson, students first discuss events in the chapters. They then focus on the killing of the young man.

Procedure

1. Ask students what new insights they have into Henry Dobbins. (Even though his girlfriend broke up with him, he still had confidence in the magic power of her pantyhose to protect him. Something about him made the monks associate him with Jesus. He had a sense of what is right and decent and objected to Azar's parody of the village girl's dance.)
2. Ask students why Kiowa objected to staying in the church. (He was a very religious man, and using the church as a kind of foxhole seemed wrong to him.)
3. Ask students to identify the most important event in the five chapters (the killing of the young Vietnamese man and the narrator's reaction to it).

4. Distribute **Handout 16**, and ask small groups to complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses

1. It is relatively easy to kill someone if he or she is seen as an abstraction called "the enemy." The narrator refuses to keep the young man abstract, but views him as a human being with future goals and a desire to live.
2. It seems as if Tim O'Brien could not come to terms with the fact that he actually killed another human being. He stared at the body, and it seems as if the image kept and keeps coming back into his mind. As he pointed out earlier in the book, once we have killed someone, there is no way of reversing the situation.
3. Kiowa agonized over Ted Lavender's death. He seems to have known how Tim felt. He had a deep Christian faith which probably led him to offer comfort. Azar, on the other hand, adopted a hard facade and seems to have tried to turn just about everything into a joke.
4. The narrator and the young man in the story both went to college, and both planned for further education. Both ended up in the war because of a kind of shame at not matching social expectations.
5. While the butterfly was there, the body seemed less ghastly: Tim focused on the freckled forehead, undamaged nose, and smooth cheek. With the gnats, Tim noticed more realistic and grisly aspects of the corpse.
6. After Ted Lavender died, Kiowa experienced a great need to talk to work out his feelings. He seems to have known that it was important to Tim's well-being not to bottle up his feelings and thoughts.
7. Since this is a piece of fiction, one can only speculate. Perhaps Tim thinks that his daughter, at the age of nine, is not ready to handle the thought of her father killing someone. He realizes a need to put the matter to rest in the best way he knows how—by telling stories.
8. Tim says he was afraid of something that was coming toward him out of the fog. The implication is that tossing the grenade was an instinctive reaction.
9. Tim is still trying to forgive himself. Sometimes he can; sometimes he cannot.

5. Point out that Tim's experience is far from unique. Every war, regardless of time and place, involves young people who in the ordinary course of things would never commit murder in acts of killing other people.
6. Distribute **Handout 17**, and ask students to read the poem several times. Then ask them how the speaker's experiences are like and unlike those of the narrator Tim O'Brien. (There is a deliberate parallel between the title of the poem and the title of a chapter; both narrators were involved in war and killed a member of the enemy. For both men, the event tugs at memory and evokes thought in an effort to explain. The voice in the poem is less emotional than the narrative voice in the novel. Both recognize that war leads to killing people more similar to than different from ourselves, people who would in different circumstances be our friends.)
7. Point out that the novel so far has said a lot about war as both a broad generality and a series of specific vivid events. Ask students to write brief position papers stating their thoughts about war. At the end of the lesson, collect papers as tickets out of class.
8. Assign students to read "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes."

Optional Activity

Assign small groups to read and report about selected war poems such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen, "Base Details" by Siegfried Sassoon, and "War Is Kind" by Stephen Crane.

A Confrontation with Death

Directions: The narrator Tim O'Brien describes himself killing a young Vietnamese soldier and his reactions to the action. It was necessary to work through feelings of disbelief, guilt, and grief. Use the following questions to discuss the incident.

1. The narrator knows nothing about the young man whose death he blames on himself. Why do you think he makes up a biographical sketch of that man's life?

2. Why does the narration come back recursively to describe the young man's body?

3. Azar mocked Tim, but Kiowa tried to comfort him through the ordeal. For what reasons would Kiowa have wanted to do that?

4. How do the young man's motives and experiences match those of Tim? Why would the narrator invent this kinship?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

5. What do you see as the significance of Tim's noticing first a butterfly and then gnats on the face of the young man?

6. Why is Kiowa's admonition to talk good advice?

7. In "Ambush," Tim tells his daughter that he did not kill anyone during the war; then later he admits that his killing a man is his reason for writing war stories. Explain the discrepancy.

8. What rationalization does Tim give for throwing the grenade?

9. Tim is relating this incident many years later. With what is he still dealing?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

"The Man He Killed"

Directions: Read the following poem carefully, and relate it to *The Things They Carried*.

The Man He Killed

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

—Thomas Hardy

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 8

Norman Bowker's Story

Objectives

- To understand the effects of the war on Norman Bowker
- To reflect on alienation and its antidotes

Notes to the Teacher

"Speaking of Courage" and "Notes" both focus on Norman Bowker, a man who has been present in the background for most of the novel. We have seen him playing checkers with Henry Dobbins in the evenings; we have heard his pleas to have the messages in stories explained; we have heard his wish that his father were not so fixed on winning medals.

In these chapters, we see and hear him after the war, a lonely man, alienated and unable to make sense of his life or to find peace. It is difficult to know how many young men like Bowker lived through the war only to commit suicide later, as statistics vary widely. Certainly, the story of Bowker's private pain and suicide shows that not everyone succeeds, as Tim O'Brien and Jimmy Cross did, in adjusting to a return to civilian life.

In this lesson, students focus on the connections between "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes." They then discuss the nature of alienation and its presence throughout the novel.

Procedure

1. Discuss with the class accounts they may have read or people they may have known who have never really recovered from bad experiences they had. Why does one person experience a disaster and go on to live a productive and reasonably contented life, while another spends the rest of his or her days in self-pity and resentment? Why does Tim O'Brien the narrator go on to have a family and be a successful writer, while Norman Bowker cannot hold a job, has no friends, and eventually kills himself?
2. Distribute **Handout 18**, and have students complete it individually or in small groups.

Suggested Responses

1. The letter excerpted in the first part of "Notes" prompted the writing of the first version of "Speaking of Courage." Tim O'Brien provides first the story, then the final outcome, and then the catalyst for the story.

2. The letter suggests that Bowker tried very hard to appear and be okay but that he was purposeless and unable to communicate. He wanted Tim to write his story.
3. Tim wrote the story and later sent it to Bowker, who pointed out that Vietnam was missing from the narrative.
4. Tim O'Brien put Vietnam into the story with events about which we have only heard hints so far.
5. The protagonist seems lonely, alienated, disappointed, bored, and purposeless as he drives around the lake again and again.
6. He would like to contact Sally, a girl he used to like, but she married someone else. He would like to talk to his friend Max, who died before the war. His father seems preoccupied with baseball. He feels that he cannot find the words that he would need to say what he means.
7. Bowker hanged himself. To the people around him, he must have seemed strange—a man with war experiences they could only try to imagine, a man who could not hold a job and who did a lot of driving around. It is not clear whether anyone could have gotten through his pretense of being okay to open real lines of communication.
8. His mother said that he did not want to cause any trouble for anybody; he committed suicide without leaving any note and did it at the YMCA, not at home.

3. Distribute **Handout 19**, and have students complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses

1. Alienation involves emotional distance, isolation, and estrangement. It is the opposite of communication, belonging, and community. Sample sentences include the following:
   - After Tom's marriage, he began to feel alienated from his fun-loving buddies.
   - The psychologist observed that the patient suffered from painful feelings of alienation from her family.
2. Bowker felt unable to say what he would have liked to have said.
3. Bowker probably would have liked someone to understand his experiences and his inability to get his life back on track.
4. Kiowa could not stop talking about Lavender's death; he wanted the others to listen.

5. Lieutenant Cross decided that he was in fact alienated from Martha, that she and he did not live in the same world. He thought this estrangement would make him a more responsible officer. He clearly did not hold on to the estrangement after the war.
6. Stories are efforts to communicate, to share experiences.
7. Kiowa seems to have known that it was important for Tim not to withdraw into himself after the killing.
8. The alienation the men must have sometimes felt was bridged by the constant storytelling and the listening that came along with it.

4. Point out that Norman Bowker's experience is not rare. People, sometimes people we know, can become depressed and find themselves unable to achieve meaningful lives and relationships. Explain that there is help in the situation. Ask students to brainstorm warning signs of possible suicidal behavior (depression, loss of interest, disturbed sleep, lack of appetite, appearance of purposelessness, withdrawal from friends and family members). Ask students what we can do if a friend or an acquaintance seems to be in this kind of trouble. (We can offer support and concern, use suicide hotlines, and persuade the person to seek medical assistance. Amateur advice is insufficient; the person will need a physician and a psychologist to get back on an even keel.)
5. Assign students to read "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip."

The Sad Story of Norman Bowker

Directions: Use the following questions to discuss the postwar life of one member of Alpha Company.

1. What is the relationship between "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes"?

2. What did Norman Bowker say in his letter to Tim O'Brien?

3. How did Tim respond? How did Norman Bowker answer the response?

4. How did the story change between its first version and the one in the novel?

5. What kind of a man does "Speaking of Courage" portray?

6. Who are the people with whom he would like to connect? Why does the connection seem impossible to him?

7. What eventually happened to Bowker? Could anything have prevented this?

8. How did his mother explain his suicide?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Alienation

Directions: Norman Bowker's painful alienation is evident, and it leads to his suicide. A close look at the novel shows that alienation and communication are major concerns throughout the stories. Use the following questions as a springboard to discuss what Tim O'Brien is doing with these topics.

1. Define *alienation,* and identify one or two antonyms. Then use the word or a variation of it in an original sentence.

2. How does Norman Bowker's letter to Tim reflect alienation?

3. What would Bowker have liked to share with someone?

4. How does Kiowa's reaction to the death of Ted Lavender reflect a refusal to become alienated?

5. Was Lieutenant Cross's burning of Martha's pictures and letter an act of alienation? Why or why not?

6. How do the narrator's comments about stories connect with the topic of alienation?

7. How do Kiowa's efforts with Tim after the killing of the young Vietnamese soldier relate to alienation?

8. To what extent were the men in Alpha Company alienated individuals?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 9

Guilt and Responsibility

Objectives

- To understand events and characters in "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip"
- To analyze relationships between responsibility and guilt

Notes to the Teacher

We know from descriptions earlier in the novel how Kiowa died. "In the Field" presents the men's reactions the next morning, their efforts to retrieve Kiowa's body, and a flashback to the dreadful evening before. "Field Trip" brings Tim O'Brien the narrator back to the field years later with his young daughter, Kathleen, in a symbolic effort to put terrible memories to rest. The tiny chapter in between, "Good Form," deals with the fact that this novel is fiction.

Guilt and atonement are among the novel's major concerns and figure strongly in the three chapters discussed in this lesson. Lieutenant Cross blamed himself for Kiowa's death, and the other men had feelings of guilt too. It seems clear to the reader that there was not much anyone could have done to save the situation, though.

In this lesson, students first summarize the details about Kiowa's death. They then discuss questions about the three chapters that are the focus of this lesson. To conclude, they discuss the nature of responsibility and guilt.

Procedure

1. Ask students to identify the members of Alpha Company whose deaths have been presented so far in the book. (Ted Lavender fell to the ground dead when he was shot in the head. Curt Lemon was blown up when he stepped on a land mine. Lee Strunk died while being evacuated after his severe injury. Kiowa died during an attack, and his body was buried in sewage.)
2. Ask students to describe what happened to Kiowa. (Lieutenant Cross did not know that the field where the men were settling in for the night was actually the village waste area. His orders directed him to use that field. It was raining heavily, and there was a fierce attack, perhaps caused by the young soldier's unwise use of a flashlight to show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. A barrage of fire, steady rain, darkness, and the stench of the field resulted in a state of chaos. Somehow Kiowa got sucked deep into the muck, and the young soldier tried but could not pull him out.)

3. Distribute **Handout 20**, and ask small groups to answer the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. On the morning after the attack in the sewage field, the soldiers were trying to find Kiowa's body so that they could get it out of the muck and send it home.
2. Lieutenant Cross felt that he should have disobeyed orders and moved the men to a safer spot. Throughout the novel, it has been apparent that Lieutenant Cross took responsibility very seriously and blamed himself when things went wrong.
3. It seems reasonable to conclude that the young soldier was the narrator Tim O'Brien. He felt guilty because he switched on a light to show off his girlfriend's picture; that light might have caused the attack.
4. Azar made stupid jokes that offended the others.
5. Lieutenant Cross is described as floating in the field and imagining himself far, far away. For the moment, at least, he was at the end of his rope. This episode epitomizes many of the characteristics the narrator expects to find in a true war story.
6. The narrator Tim says that he did not actually kill the young Vietnamese soldier and that nearly everything in the book we are reading is fiction. For some readers, this is annoying; for others, it is intriguing.
7. "Field Trip" deals with the narrator's return to Vietnam years later with his young daughter and focuses on his visit to the field where Kiowa died.
8. The trip and the entire book are all about coming to terms with memories and efforts to make peace with them.

4. Point out that Lieutenant Cross had a lot of responsibilities, and when things went wrong, he struggled with strong feelings of guilt. Distribute **Handout 21**, and ask students to complete it individually.

Suggested Responses

1. A responsibility is something one is expected to accomplish. Guilt is a regretful feeling about having done something wrong or having failed to do something right.
2. Most people experience guilt when their failure to carry out a responsibility results in damage to others or causes things to go askew.
3. Moderate this part of the discussion carefully to protect privacy and emotions. An example might be someone feeling guilty about causing a lot of worry when a simple phone call could have explained a later-than-expected arrival.

4. People should experience guilt if they deliberately cause damage or difficulty. The degree of guilt should be commensurate with the severity of the damage. If the damage was unavoidable, people should experience sorrow but not guilt; however, guilt is not always a rational emotion.
5. The guilt for Kiowa's death does not belong to any one person but to the combination of factors that cause nations to go to war.

5. Assign students to read the remainder of the book.

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

Directions: Use the following questions to clarify your understanding of the chapters.

1. What were the soldiers in the field trying to do?

2. What feelings plagued Lieutenant Cross?

3. Who was the young soldier? Why did he feel guilty?

4. How did Azar irritate the other men?

5. How does "In the Field" end? Why does it end that way?

6. What startling admission does the narrator make in "Good Form"? How did it affect you?

7. What is the main focus of "Field Trip"?

8. Why did the narrator go back to a place that is full of terrible memories for him?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Responsibility and Guilt

Directions: Read the information, and answer the questions.

Sometimes when something bad happens, we hear people say, "If I had only . . ." This is especially characteristic of people in positions of responsibility. "If I had only checked the weather forecast before we went out on the boat!" "If I had only stopped the car before trying to change the CD." "If I had only turned on the security alarm as I left the house."

In *The Things They Carried*, Lieutenant Cross feels that he could have prevented Kiowa's death if he had only moved the men to a different place. The young soldier wishes that he had not flicked on that light.

1. How would you define the words *responsibility* and *guilt*?

2. What are the relationships between responsibility and guilt?

3. Have you ever had a reason to say, "If I had only . . ."? Have you ever heard someone else say those words? Give an example.

4. In what circumstances should a person feel guilt?

5. Who should feel guilty for Kiowa's death?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 10

Concluding Chapters

Objectives

- To understand Tim the narrator's attitudes toward Bobby Jorgenson
- To reflect on reasons for including Linda in the story

Notes to the Teacher

In this lesson, students first focus on Bobby Jorgenson's bungled handling of Tim's life-threatening wounds, Tim's reactions, and the methods Tim used to retaliate, as well as the unexpected result of the whole situation. They also consider what happened to Rat Kiley. They then focus on the final chapter, Linda's role in the book, and O'Brien's comments about storytelling. Finally, students receive directions for a culminating essay about a character in this novel. You can make this an out-of-class assignment, or you can have students gather information and complete the essays as timed writings.

The story about Linda fills in some of the narrator Tim's background. We have seen him as part of Alpha Company, during the summer after he graduated from college, and in his present life as a forty-three-year-old writer. The final chapter shows us what he was like as a young boy. It also shows that death, like many of the other things people carry, is ubiquitous. Stories, in contrast, keep things and people alive, at least in imagination.

Procedure

1. Ask students how many times Tim the narrator was wounded in Vietnam (twice). Ask them what went wrong the second time. (Rat Kiley was not there, and the terrified new medic, Bobby Jorgenson, hardly knew what he was doing. Jorgenson failed to treat O'Brien's wound and his shock effectively. This resulted in months of unnecessary suffering.)
2. Ask students what happened when Tim saw Jorgenson again. (Tim, no longer in combat, wanted revenge for all of the pain he experienced because of Jorgenson. By this time, Jorgenson was an accepted member of Alpha Company, and Tim was out of the loop. The only person he could get to help him in an effort to terrify Jorgenson was Azar. Jorgenson did not get terrified, and he and Tim ended up on cordial terms.)
3. Ask students what happened to Rat Kiley and whether they found this surprising. (Earlier the narrator explained that one way out of combat was a self-inflicted wound, but he stated that none of the men

in Alpha Company did that. Here we see that one actually did. Rat Kiley snapped emotionally and shot himself in the foot so that he would be taken out of Vietnam. It is probably more surprising that so few took this way out. Rat Kiley, as we know from incidents following the death of Curt Lemon, was a passionate young man who had been strained beyond his limits.)

4. Ask students whether anything surprised them about the last chapter. (It introduces Linda, a girl from Tim's past.)
5. Distribute **Handout 22**, and have small groups answer the questions.

Suggested Responses

1. Linda and Tim were nine-year-old best friends. They were in the fourth grade. For a long time, he did not know that she was being treated for cancer; she died, and he went to the wake with his father. Even now, more than thirty years later, he believes that the love between them was real and enduring.
2. Linda's death was the beginning of Tim's need to deal with the reality of death as a part of life. He describes how the pain of guilt and sorrow is present in all stages of life. Earlier he stated that war stories are not really just about war. We can see that here.
3. Linda's body was swollen. She did not look like her natural delicate self, and she did not look as if she were asleep. He realized that death is not beautiful. In the words of Mitchell Sanders, "Death sucks."
4. Tim made up stories about Linda to keep her alive in his mind.
5. The passage is enigmatic but somehow consoling. Linda said that being dead does not matter, and she told Tim not to cry anymore.
6. Stories bring the past alive in our minds; they offer solace, insight, even a kind of redemption.
7. By writing stories, Tim is in essence trying to save his own life. The solace of stories and the memories they bring have probably been the most important things Tim has carried from both the war and the rest of his life.

6. Distribute **Handout 23**, and carefully review the directions. You may want to set a date for all students to submit their topic choices and thesis statements for approval.
7. Distribute **Handout 24**, and explain that you will use this rubric to evaluate the final essays. Point out that students may find it helpful as they draft and revise their work.

Linda's Story

Directions: Use the following questions as springboards to discuss the last chapter in *The Things They Carried*.

1. What is the story of Linda's life?

2. What place does Linda's story have in a book about the war in Vietnam?

3. When Tim saw Linda at the funeral home, what did he realize about death? How does that, as well as what he later saw on the battlefield, relate to Mitchell Sanders's remark about death?

4. As a boy, how did Tim console himself about Linda's death?

5. Find the passage in which Tim imagines Linda describing what it is like to be dead. What does it mean to you?

6. Throughout the novel, Tim has talked about the value of telling stories. He even says that miracles happen in stories. What does he mean?

7. Review the last sentence of the novel. What is the author conveying with these words?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Culminating Essay Assignment

Directions: Read the following information regarding an essay you will write to culminate your study of *The Things They Carried*. Then create your plan for your essay.

Tim O'Brien's novel presents a number of memorable characters, many of them part of Alpha Company. Select one who appears prominently enough for you to be able to make that person the topic of an analytical essay.

You might want to work with a character that emerges frequently. Examples include Jimmy Cross, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, Rat Kiley, and the narrator Tim O'Brien. You could also deal with a character that appears fleetingly but also has a big impact on the narrator, such as Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender, or the Vietnamese math major. It is also possible to work with a character like Martha, Mary Anne, or Linda. Just make sure there is enough information about the character to provide textual evidence in your essay.

Use sticky notes to mark pages in the novel which focus on your essay topic. Reread the passages that provide insight into the character. After thinking about those passages, create a thesis statement that expresses your main insight(s) into that person. Then indicate the steps you will take to authenticate your main point. Your development can, for example, come in chronological order; another option is to organize your paper topically.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Name:

Evaluation Rubric

Directions: Use the following criteria for evaluation while writing your essay.

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1. Focuses on the role of one character in *The Things They Carried*				
2. Develops a clear and significant thesis				
3. Provides keen insights into the character's personality and role in the book				
4. Relates the character to the narrator's comments about the nature of war stories				
5. Provides textual evidence, including well-chosen quotations				
6. Is free from errors in diction, syntax, and spelling				
7. Is presented in a neat manuscript with an effective title				

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 11

Focus on Themes

Objectives

- To understand the novel's blend of nonfiction and fiction
- To identify the novel's central themes and provide textual evidence to support those ideas

Notes to the Teacher

It is important to distinguish Tim O'Brien the author from Tim O'Brien the narrator, and the language throughout this unit has taken pains to do so. It is true that the two have much in common: growing up in Minnesota, graduating from Macalester College, being drafted into the U.S. Army, being deployed to Vietnam, returning to civilian life, and working as a writer. Still, as the author insists, *The Things They Carried* is fiction, not autobiography. Efforts to distinguish facts from products of creative imagination are futile. In the end, it really does not matter. The book tells stories that bring characters and events to life and immerse readers in a powerful experience.

This is a rich novel replete with themes relevant to our own lives. It deals with war, memory, love, friendship, death, storytelling, human limitations, guilt, regret, and hope. In this lesson, students first distinguish the author from the narrator; they then focus on themes.

Procedure

1. Point out that both the author and the narrator of the novel are named Tim O'Brien, and they have some key facts in common. (See Notes to the Teacher.) The author does not have a daughter Kathleen, and characters in Alpha Company do not have the same names as the men who were foot soldiers with the author in Vietnam. The book is a novel, a work of fiction, but, like all fiction, it reflects the author's experiences and ideas. Clarify with an example: Students could write stories about their school using the school's real name but peopling it with imaginary characters very much like the real classmates they know. The result would be fiction that communicates the truth of what the school is really like.
2. Define the word *theme*, and distinguish themes from topics. For example, fear is a topic; the paralyzing power of fear is a theme. Explain that *The Things They Carried* has many themes that are relevant to all of us. Distribute **Handout 25**, and ask small groups to complete the analysis. Emphasize that the list of topics is not exhaustive. Follow with discussion.

Suggested Responses

1. War is complex, intense, ambiguous, bewildering, and terrifying. It often makes people less humane. We see this in all of the examples of the attacks, which are visually stunning, confusing, and enough to stun a person into cringing immobility.
2. Human beings ache for love, but they are often disappointed in their efforts to find it. Martha cannot love Jimmy Cross the way he would like; Mary Anne disappears into the jungle; both Dobbins and Bowker see the girls they like turn to other men.
3. Death is final, implacable, and ugly; it has nothing to do with eternal peace. Ted Lavender's face is destroyed; Curt Lemon is blown to pieces. Linda lies bloated in her casket. The young Vietnamese math major's body quickly begins to deteriorate.
4. Stories keep things and events alive in memory. As long as Tim remembers Linda, she is not really dead; the past is more than just a list of facts. For its real experience, we need to tell and listen to stories. One reason for Norman Bowker's suicide was his inability to tell his story.
5. Fear can make people do what they do not want to do; sometimes people are too afraid to show fear. Tim's fear of criticism and disapproval brought him back away from the Canadian border.
6. All memories are part fiction. Our imaginations indelibly and inevitably color them. The novel presents many memories of Vietnam, all fictionalized by imagination. Often a video of what actually happened would astound us by its contrast to what we think we remember.
7. Guilt, even when we could not have prevented something from happening, can prompt irrational actions and immobilize a person. Lieutenant Cross is an example of responsibility leading to intense feelings of guilt. All of the men felt a sense of guilt after Kiowa was lost.
8. Limitations are inevitable and have to be accepted; there are no noble heroes. After a time of great danger, a person is most often just glad to be alive, not to be the one who is dead. Medics do not always do what is necessary. Officers cannot always save their men.

3. Ask students to select one of these themes or another one that interests them and to reflect on that theme in a letter that they write to one of the characters in the novel. If necessary, provide examples: a letter about love addressed to Mary Anne or to Martha; a letter about fear addressed to Ted Lavender or to Tim O'Brien; one about guilt addressed to Lieutenant Cross.

Themes in *The Things They Carried*

Directions: Some of the many topics that are central to the novel are listed in the following chart. Phrase each topic as a theme by indicating what the book says or implies about it. Then provide examples from the text to support your ideas.

Topic	Theme	Textual Evidence
1. War		
2. Love		
3. Death		
4. Storytelling		

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

 Name:

Topic	Theme	Textual Evidence
5. Fear		
6. Memory		
7. Guilt		
8. Limitations		

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Lesson 12

Style in *The Things They Carried*

Objective

- To analyze Tim O'Brien's style from various angles

Notes to the Teacher

Literary style is an elusive topic, since it consists of all of an author or a work's characteristic choices in terms of diction, syntax, imagery, structure, and figurative language. One way to approach it is to talk about clothing or music styles, subjects that are quite familiar to most students. The world of art also offers an entry into the topic, as the style in this novel is impressionistic; this is what makes the novel so hard to pin down.

Impressionism in art is exemplified by masters such as Claude Monet and Pierre Auguste Renoir. The paintings, of course, are still, but they give illusions of motion and are quite different in style from other movements such as cubism. In literature, impressionism often consists of momentary glimpses of events and characters in order to convey overall impressions.

This lesson aims to lead students to increased appreciation of what Tim O'Brien has accomplished here and to an understanding of the complexity of superior fiction. For the first procedure, you will need two shoes that exemplify contrasting styles; you will also want to show students two paintings that exemplify contrasting styles, for example, Monet's *Water Lilies* and Pablo Picasso's *Three Musicians*, both of which are readily available on the Internet.

Procedure

1. Show students two shoes that contrast in style. Point out that they have a lot in common—both are attire for feet. Ask students to describe their styles. For example, ballerina flats are very different from loafers, and both of those are unlike oxfords and stiletto heels. Descriptive words might include the following: *casual*, *elegant*, *sturdy*, *formal*, *relaxed*.
2. Ask students to take a few minutes to examine Monet's *Water Lilies* and Picasso's *Three Musicians*. Explain that both are famous paintings by great artists, but they exemplify different styles known as impressionism and cubism. Ask students to describe their styles. (In *Water Lilies*, the colors are muted, and the shapes are smooth and rounded; the images give the impression of serenity and motion. The style is

impressionism. Picasso's colors are vivid and the shapes are angular; although the painting is silent, the viewer can almost hear the sound. The image is full of energy. The style is cubism.)

3. Tell students that there is also such a thing as literary style. Ask them to describe the styles of other stories or novels they have read. (For example, the style of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is conversational and reflective; most works by William Faulkner tend to have long, convoluted sentences, while Ernest Hemingway's prose is often clipped. J. D. Salinger created an unmistakable voice for Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*.
4. Distribute **Handout 26**, and ask small groups to complete the exercise.

Suggested Responses

1. The prefix *meta* means changed or altered in form. A metaphor is a comparison of two unlike things. Metafiction changes the form of fiction. This change can be seen in a blurred distinction between fiction and reality. In the novel, the reader does not know for sure what the author is telling from actual experience and what is imagined.
2. O'Brien has applied the description of the war to the style of this novel by mixing what he calls *happening-truth* and *story-truth* and by telling stories in a fragmented way. For example, Curt Lemon's death is told in glimpses, requiring the reader to put all the pieces together. His body is fragmented, and so is his story.
3. Impressionism captures momentary glimpses. "The Man I Killed" is impressionistic because it is told from several angles and in a fragmented way.
4. The book is both a novel and a collection of stories, many of which can stand on their own. They are also connected to tell a unified story.
5. Nothing is absolutely true in any story because each person sifts incidents through his or her perceptions of what happens. Since everyone has a different background and point of reference, no two people see things exactly the same way.
6. Tim O'Brien wrote a novel that works very well; the language matches the meaning. It is not unusual for readers to say, "This is one of the few books I have ever read all the way through."

5. Ask students, working individually or with partners, to find passages in the novel which reflect Tim O'Brien's style and to analyze them for imagery, figurative language, repetition, use of time, and other relevant characteristics. Conclude by having the class share insights.

Style in *The Things They Carried*

Directions: Style of writing can be hard to pin down, but it is immediately evident that the style in Tim O'Brien's novel is distinctly different from the style in books such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Lord of the Flies*. Use the following questions to explore and analyze the style in this novel.

1. What does the prefix *meta* mean? What is metafiction? How does the term apply to the book?

2. Throughout the novel, the war is described as uncertain and ambiguous, impossible to analyze. The old standards of real and unreal, right and wrong, and good and bad are swirled around in the minds of the author and his characters. How has the author applied his description of war to the style he uses to tell his stories? In other words, how does his style fit his subject matter? Give an example.

3. Look up a description of impressionism. How does the story "The Man I Killed" fit the definition?

4. Is this book a novel or a collection of short stories? Explain your answer.

5. Apply the following idea to any story, war or otherwise: "It's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true."

6. How well do you think O'Brien has created a style that fits his subject matter?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Reading Guide

Directions: As you read *The Things They Carried*, record information to help you remember people, events, and main ideas.

"The Things They Carried"

1. What sorts of things did the young men in Vietnam carry?
2. What happened to Ted Lavender?
3. Why did Kiowa want to keep talking about Ted Lavender's death?
4. Why did Lieutenant Cross burn Martha's pictures and letters?

"Love"

5. How does the time and place setting shift?
6. What does Jimmy Cross say about Martha?

"Spin"

7. Why is the chapter entitled "Spin"?
8. Give an example of comic relief in this section.

"On the Rainy River"

9. What does the chapter reveal about the narrator?
10. What dilemma did the narrator face?
11. What decision did the narrator make? Why?

"Enemies"

12. What caused the fight between Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen?
13. How did Dave Jensen resolve the conflict?

"Friends"

14. What pact did Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk make?
15. What happened to Lee Strunk?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

"How to Tell a True War Story"

16. Why did Rat Kiley torture the baby water buffalo?

17. What are some characteristics of a true war story?

18. What weird experience did the six men on the reconnaissance team have?

"The Dentist"

19. What does the story show about Curt Lemon?

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

20. Who is the source of this story?

21. What did Mark Fossie manage to do?

22. What happened to Mary Anne Bell?

"Stockings"

23. What talisman seemed to protect Henry Dobbins?

"Church"

24. Why did the two monks relate so well with Dobbins?

25. Why did Kiowa object to staying there?

"The Man I Killed"

26. The narrator actually knows nothing about the dead young Vietnamese man. What biographical sketch does he make up? Why?

27. At the end of the chapter, what is Kiowa trying to do?

"Ambush"

28. How does this chapter relate to the previous one?

"Style"

29. What strange sight did the men see in the burned village?

30. Why did Dobbins become angry with Azar?

"Speaking of Courage"

31. As you read the chapter, what did you see happening to Norman Bowker? Why?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

"Notes"

32. How does this chapter relate to the previous one?

33. What does this chapter imply about Tim O'Brien's purpose?

"In the Field"

34. What was wrong with the site where the men dug their foxholes?

35. What happened to Kiowa?

36. What do the concluding paragraphs describe?

"Good Form"

37. Did Tim kill a Vietnamese soldier, or did he not?

"Field Trip"

38. What does this chapter describe?

39. Why is Kathleen's reaction to the Vietnamese battle site so different from her father's?

"The Ghost Soldiers"

40. Who was Bobby Jorgenson?

41. What happened to Morty Phillips?

42. Does the elaborate ruse to scare Jorgenson seem like a true war story? Why or why not?

"Night Life"

43. What happened to Rat Kiley? Why?

"The Lives of the Dead"

44. Who was Linda? Why is her story included here?

45. What does the narrator seem to believe about stories?

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Reading Guide Responses

1. The men carried necessities, weaponry, letters and pictures, talismans, pests such as leeches and lice, and intangible things like fear, memories, and love.

2. Ted Lavender was shot in the head at a moment when the men were not aware of the enemy presence.

3. Kiowa was trying to process the fact that life can be extinguished immediately.

4. This was a symbolic action expressing the lieutenant's feelings of guilt and determination not to be distracted from his responsibilities again.

5. The setting is Tim's home in Massachusetts many years after the conflict in Vietnam.

6. Cross saw Martha, now a missionary and nurse, at a college reunion. He still loves her; she expects never to marry.

7. The chapter spins from anecdote to anecdote, providing fleeting glimpses of the men's experiences in Vietnam.

8. One is Mitchell Sanders as he puts lice in an envelope to mail to the draft board.

9. The narrator is a college graduate who was drafted. He is intelligent, and he is a writer. He grew up in Minnesota. He is a serious person.

10. The narrator could see only two choices: report to the army or flee to Canada.

11. The narrator decided to report to the draft board because he could not bear the thought of neighbors, friends, and family looking down on him.

12. The immediate cause was a missing knife, which Lee Strunk actually did take. The deeper cause was pent-up anger and frustration.

13. Dave Jensen decided to punish himself so that Lee Strunk would not decide to do it.

14. Jensen and Strunk made a pact that if either were wounded in a devastating way, the other would kill him.

15. Strunk was shot and lost his leg; he begged Jensen not to kill him, but then died as he was being evacuated.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

16. Rat Kiley's best friend was blown up by a land mine. His actions astonish the other men and are completely irrational expressions of rage.

17. True war stories are often unbelievable and seem pointless and endless. There is nothing noble or uplifting in a true war story.

18. The men hear or hallucinate all sorts of things, especially music.

19. The narrator has admitted that he did not really like Curt Lemon; the story shows Lemon's tendency to show off and need to be admired.

20. "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" comes from Rat Kiley, known for exaggeration.

21. Mark Fossie managed to have his girlfriend come from Ohio to the station in Vietnam where he was a medic.

22. The girlfriend became fascinated and intrigued with Vietnam and disappeared into the mountains. No one knows for sure what the outcome was.

23. Henry Dobbins had his former girlfriend's pantyhose, and he wore them around his neck for luck. They seemed to work, too.

24. The two monks seem to have sensed a basic simplicity in Dobbins. He even considered the possibility of becoming a monk himself.

25. Kiowa was deeply religious, and he did not feel right living in a church.

26. The narrator seems to need to see the dead man as a real person who did not want to be in a war any more than Tim O'Brien did.

27. Kiowa tried to help his friend not to "lose it" after the killing.

28. The chapter retells the story; the scene played itself over and over again in his mind.

29. A young girl all alone was dancing in the midst of the destruction.

30. Azar tried to make a joke of the girl, and Dobbins objected.

31. Norman Bowker seems disconnected from everyone, purposeless, and frustrated. One keeps thinking something awful is going to happen, but it never does.

32. The chapter shares part of Bowker's letter to O'Brien and reveals some of the poor man's struggles.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

33. Tim O'Brien is striving to tell the truth about their experiences.

34. The men did not know it, but they were settling into a latrine.

35. Kiowa was buried in the field.

36. The paragraphs describe Lieutenant Cross floating in the field and staring at the sky.

37. It is impossible to answer the question. He feels as if he did.

38. Years after the war, the narrator returned to Vietnam with his daughter. The chapter focuses on the field where Kiowa died.

39. Kathleen does not bring the same experiences to the place. To her, it is just a field.

40. Bobby Jorgenson was the medic who replaced Rat Kiley and who was so inexperienced and frightened that he did not treat Tim's injury properly.

41. This man, whom we do not know, on a lark went swimming and seems to have gotten polio.

42. Tim tries with Azar's help to terrify Jorgenson, an action that seems childish and pointless in the midst of a war. It just might be a true war story.

43. Rat Kiley had finally had too much; he shot himself in the foot to get out of Vietnam. It seems as if the other men all understood.

44. Linda was Tim's childhood friend who died of cancer. She was his first contact with death, which is such a prominent reality in this book. Her memory is one of the things he carried. The story provides insight into the young boy who grew up to be Tim the narrator.

45. Stories prevent things and people from dying away entirely; stories preserve reality and communicate truth.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Character Quiz: *The Things They Carried*

Directions: Match the description to the character in *The Things They Carried*.

_____ 1. Henry Dobbins

_____ 2. Kiowa

_____ 3. Jimmy Cross

_____ 4. Ted Lavender

_____ 5. Curt Lemon

_____ 6. Mark Fossie

_____ 7. Tim O'Brien

_____ 8. Dave Jensen

_____ 9. Norman Bowker

_____ 10. Mitchell Sanders

_____ 11. Elroy Berdahl

_____ 12. Bobby Jorgenson

_____ 13. Mary Anne

_____ 14. Martha

_____ 15. Linda

a. man who ran the Tip Top Lodge
b. army veteran who later committed suicide
c. child who died of cancer
d. man whose good luck charm was his girlfriend's pantyhose
e. man who was buried in a putrid field
f. man who used drugs and tranquilizers to dull his fear
g. the narrator of the story
h. person who later became a Lutheran missionary
i. man who was blown up when he stepped on a land mine
j. person who disappeared into the mountainous jungle
k. man who persuaded his girlfriend to come to Vietnam
l. medic who failed to treat Tim O'Brien for shock
m. man who told a story about a weird six-man mission in the mountains
n. man who beat up Lee Strunk and later made a pact with him
o. man who sometimes carried a pebble in his mouth

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Objective Test: *The Things They Carried*

Directions: Choose the best answers.

_____ 1. The narrator of *The Things They Carried* grew up in
- a. Oklahoma.
- b. Minnesota.
- c. Illinois.
- d. New Jersey.

_____ 2. The narrator speaks about his daughter, who is named
- a. Martha.
- b. Sheila.
- c. Margaret.
- d. Kathleen.

_____ 3. How often was the narrator wounded in Vietnam?
- a. never
- b. once
- c. twice
- d. three times

_____ 4. Who sent the narrator a letter asking him to write a story?
- a. Norman Bowker
- b. Jimmy Cross
- c. Henry Dobbins
- d. Rat Kiley

_____ 5. Who helped the narrator in a prank aiming for revenge?
- a. Azar
- b. Kiowa
- c. Henry Dobbins
- d. Rat Kiley

_____ 6. A toe popper is
- a. an army boot.
- b. a foxhole.
- c. a land mine.
- d. an army song.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

_____7. The person in the novel who most often feels burdened with responsibility and guilt is

a. Rat Kiley.
b. Jimmy Cross.
c. Mitchell Sanders.
d. Henry Dobbins.

_____8. The person who came to visit the narrator years after the war, looked at pictures with him, and shared stories is

a. Norman Bowker.
b. Lee Strunk.
c. Bobby Jorgenson.
d. Jimmy Cross.

_____9. Who sometimes described the war as "mellow"?

a. Mark Fossie
b. Ted Lavender
c. Rat Kiley
d. Dave Jensen

_____10. The narrator describes himself killing a young Vietnamese man who studied

a. English literature.
b. mathematics.
c. biology.
d. music theory.

_____11. What did Mitchell Sanders mail back to the draft board?

a. his draft notice
b. a man's thumb
c. lice
d. photographs

_____12. The narrator says that war stories

a. do not have moral messages.
b. often seem pointless.
c. are often unbelievable.
d. are all of the above.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

_____ 13. The one person the narrator says that he did not like very much was
- a. Curt Lemon.
- b. Azar.
- c. Ted Lavender.
- d. Dave Jensen.

_____ 14. Rat Kiley expresses amazement that Mary Anne arrived in Vietnam wearing
- a. a school uniform.
- b. white culottes.
- c. blue jeans.
- d. a sundress.

_____ 15. The men on the six-man reconnaissance trip to the mountains were bothered by
- a. swarms of mosquitoes.
- b. ghostly visions all around them.
- c. mortar attacks.
- d. the sound of music.

_____ 16. In one village that had been attacked, the men saw a young girl
- a. dancing.
- b. playing a flute.
- c. plowing a field.
- d. cooking rice.

_____ 17. The summer the narrator graduated from college, he worked at
- a. a fast-food restaurant.
- b. a library.
- c. a swimming pool.
- d. a meatpacking company.

_____ 18. Norman Bowker's father wanted him to
- a. run away to Canada.
- b. win medals.
- c. marry the girl next door.
- d. become a professional baseball player.

_____ 19. The two monks at the church took a special liking to
- a. Henry Dobbins.
- b. Jimmy Cross.
- c. Tim O'Brien.
- d. Kiowa.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

_____20. The company member who tried to help the narrator after the shooting of the young Vietnamese man was

a. Azar.
b. Jimmy Cross.
c. Kiowa.
d. Rat Kiley.

_____21. The narrator tells the story of a childhood friend who wore

a. a red cap.
b. white culottes.
c. saddle shoes.
d. ear muffs.

_____22. The person who made a pact and then changed his mind was

a. Rat Kiley.
b. Lee Strunk.
c. Azar.
d. Curt Lemon.

_____23. After Ted Lavender was shot, Kiowa was astonished and

a. grief-stricken.
b. filled with guilt.
c. glad to be alive.
d. determined to get revenge.

_____24. When the narrator returned to Vietnam years after the war, he made a special trip in honor of

a. the young math major.
b. Kiowa.
c. Curt Lemon.
d. Ted Lavender.

_____25. The narrator says that the main thing that sent him to Vietnam was

a. patriotism.
b. his sense of humor.
c. the uncertainty of his own future.
d. fear of disapproval.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Answer Keys

Character Quiz

1. d
2. e
3. o
4. f
5. i
6. k
7. g
8. n
9. b
10. m
11. a
12. l
13. j
14. h
15. c

Objective Test

1. b
2. d
3. c
4. a
5. a
6. c
7. b
8. d
9. b
10. b
11. c
12. d
13. a
14. b
15. d
16. a
17. d
18. b
19. a
20. c
21. a
22. b
23. c
24. b
25. d

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Essay Test

Directions: Plan each essay ahead of time by jotting down your main points and the textual evidence from *The Things They Carried* which you will use to support them.

1. Discuss the significance of the novel's title, including both literal meanings and symbolic nuances.

2. Describe the book's structure. How did the author organize his presentation of events and characters?

3. What does the narrator mean by the following sentence?

   > The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow.

4. The book includes many stories—some very short, others more extended. Select one that you found especially interesting, summarize it, and explain what it adds to the novel as a whole.

© COPYRIGHT, The Center for Learning. Used with permission. Not for resale.

Common Core English Language Arts Standards

The Things They Carried

ISBN 978-1-56077-960-5

Entire Unit

RL.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RL.9-10.2	Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
RL.9-10.3	Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
RL.9-10.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
RL.9-10.5	Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
RL.11-12.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
RL.11-12.2	Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
RL.11-12.3	Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
RL.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

© The Center for Learning • www.centerforlearning.org

RL.11-12.5	Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
RL.11-12.6	Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Source

Common Core State Standards (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

TheCenterforLearning

TAP® Instructional Materials
Teachers/Authors/Publishers

Developing trusted, teacher-tested resources for 40 years, The Center for Learning is a nonprofit publisher of tools that enhance students' learning experience in the humanities.

Designed for use in any educational setting, the Novel/Drama series includes a wide range of lesson plans and coursework. The Center for Learning's materials help teachers

- foster student understanding and appreciation of literary forms and genres
- build students' communication skills
- promote student thought on crucial issues
- cultivate lifelong learning

Visit the Web site for complete publication descriptions and ordering information:
www.centerforlearning.org

ISBN 978-1-56077-960-5