



Physical and Emotional Encumbrance: A Study in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Abstract

William Timothy O'Brien is a celebrated American short story writer, journalist, and war novelist. *The Things They Carried* is a reminiscence of interconnected short stories published in 1990. It is a semi-autobiographical work which deals with the different aspects of life. Through the stories, the author exclusively illustrates the painful encounters of the American soldiers in the Vietnam war zone. He largely concentrates on the physical and emotional encumbrances of his comrades. The soldiers in the war always carries something among like the emotional baggage, grief, fear, love, mental and physical burdens. He makes an effort to provide authentic war stories, with a focus on morality, giving voice to the voiceless, and combat experiences, no one can escape from this terrible cycle, which never ends. This work clearly shows how soldiers risking their lives and highlights their bravery, makes harder for them to fully commit themselves in the war. Even though, he returned from the war decades ago, still, he carries the memories with him, and he cannot endure the mental encumbrance. The sense of loss gives him a gloomy feeling. The memories are like a wake-up call which leads him towards the reality.

Key Words: Memory, morality, love, family, horrific, encumbrance.

William Timothy OBrien is a prominent American novelist, short story writer, journalist, and best known for his war related novels. The book *The Things They Carried* was published in 1990 is a recollection of real war stories happened in the Vietnam War. O'Brien is a War veteran who left the horrors of conflict around twenty years ago and yet, he carries the load, violence, the brutality of the battle with him. He illustrates the troops physical and mental encumbrance through the stories, as well as the shame, dread and love they carried. Even now, soldiers are faced with dilemma: either leave the conflict and seek safety elsewhere, or continue fighting in the war.

The key word "Things" refers to the mental, emotional and psychological encumbrance of the young soldiers were obliged to bear while serving in Vietnam. All the soldiers have strong emotional ties to their lovers, friends and families. The young troops are constantly burdened physically and mentally by the hostile environments of battle. They need special energy to overcome the weight of the things they carried to support the weight of the military jacket; a strong person is required.

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing, these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects, this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture (20).

The majority of the characters in the conflict are O'Brien's fellow soldiers, who all carry remnants of their pasts and keep their feet moving in an unpleasant environment. Their tangible possessions included a variety of weapons, explosives, knives, gunpowder, binocular, protective jackets band ammo that had to carried about all the time. They wore steel helmets that weighed five pounds, carried two or three canteens of water, and pocket knives, but they still, believed that they could defend their nations and to turn back home as how they set foot in war.

Lee Strunk carried his slingshot, Rat Kiley carried brand and M&M's candy. Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried the starlight scope, which weighed 6.3 pounds with its aluminum carrying case. Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriends pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comfort. They all carried ghosts (9).

Soldiers are the spectators of the entire blood thirsty of the war and countenance of death in countless times out in the field. Although the author exposes the readers that the war stories are not always true, but he elucidates the purpose to write about his war stories. "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present" (172).

The items that they carried were all somehow interconnected to them and their life. Due to some mistakes made by some of the characters and their disinterest in battle, which makes them difficult to perform in the war perfectly. Through the phrase "Freedom Birds", it is possible to comprehend and illustrate how they want to free themselves from their emotional burdens through the dreams, which pulls them away from the cause of the injured and the dead. Even though they are real victims on the battle field, but necessarily they have to do their duty for their family and nation.

Each soldier has a unique encumbrance and the pressures of the conflict, which demonstrates how varied they are. All the soldiers have the same experience and different difficulties. Similar life experiences were discussed by Tim OBrien in a conversation with Patrick Hicks. There, the author discusses the strength of hatred, how it contributes to conflict, and how troops might deal with it, he explains:

you couldnt even see the enemy and therefore the enemy became even more hated.... its like being haunted and youre getting blown up, but there are not front lines and there no enemy soldiers in uniform.... It all became the enemy. Vietnam became the enemy. The whole place became the enemy. (90)

The same incident occurs in "The Things They Carried" where Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the platoon leader who represents himself for selfless dedication. The emotional and physical responsibilities carried by O'Briens characters are intense and they all have heavy bodily responsibilities with intense emotional weights. Jimmy, the platoon leader carrying a compass, maps, a code, a

book, the responsibilities of his men's lives, and the memory of his girlfriend Martha. " He pictures Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her."(6)

Jimmy's negligence is a witness to the tragedy of Lavender who plays a unique role. His mind is wandering and he had to work hard to keep his concentration on the conflict. The loss of his friend plunged him into emotional turmoil. Being the youngest bunch and the first to pass away permanently, Lavender was wounded in the head while fighting outside the town of Than Khe. His absence represents a pivotal turning in the story. He was deeply concerned by his mistake and unable to perform his duties due to the memories of his friend Lavender. Before the tragedy, he always thinking about his lady love Martha, the letters from her and their time together. This is the reason for dereliction of his duty. All of these emotions bind him to emotional encumbrance and feelings of guilt.

His mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending waking barefoot along the Jersey Shore, with Martha, carrying nothing (8).

Jimmy made the difficult decision to fully forget about Martha and concentrate on the battle, despite the fact that it hurts him. After Ted Lavender's passing, Lieutenant Jimmy was able to focus on the fight and safeguard his soldiers by coming to the proper conclusion. Eventually, he realized that his men and the fight were more essential at that time than his love about Martha. He is forced to give up some feelings and he bound to burn all her love letters, photos, and other mementos of Martha as a way of shedding an emotional weight. OBrien portrays Jimmy Cross love for Martha as the heaviest of his burdens and forget a loved one is not a breeze to all; it takes more than a willing time. It weighs heavily on him because of the emotional encumbrance. Critic Marilyn Wesley states as, "fight the inexpressible fear the men share by obsessing about a girl he wants to love and substituting the banalities of her letters for the reality of Vietnam"(6). Through the line, one can understand that Jimmy feels the fragments of his heart falling apart. Thus, he lost concentration on the conflict. To release his feelings, he could only cry in the night under the cover of darkness, just like other person, soldiers also have emotions and other feelings. "OBrien deliberately explores Jimmys case to show the emotional burdens that the soldiers brought along together with the things they carried (63)." As was previously said, Jimmy is not only felt the situation, but every soldier carries a significant amount of emotional baggage.

Family bonds are usually very powerful which makes difficult to live apart from one's family. Kiowa was a native American soldier in the Vietnam War and, he was the most loved one by all. His death was heavy for other soldiers, due of his altruism and compassion for them. Being a Baptist, he always keeps New Testament in his luggage, which shows a strong indication of his Christian upbringing, and also has a hunting hatchet that belonged to his grandfather, which is one of his most important weapons. He considered those things are the relationship to his culture. Apart from it, he constantly carried his family's memories and emotions with him. When he

entered into the tunnel with heavy emotional burdens he was killed by a mortar at the time." Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father..."(3).

The other characters Dave Jenson and Lee Strunk shared a sense of trust in the short story. They carried lot of items, including earplugs, toothbrushes, dental floss, soaps and tanning lotion. They become close during the war after a few junior physical encounters. At the time they make agreement for each other to free one another, if one of them becomes seriously hurt and burdens the other soldier needs to take him down and arrange for him to die.

In late August they made a pact that if one of them should ever get totally fucked up-a wheelchair wound- the other guy would automatically find a way to end it. As far as i could tell they were serious. They drew it up on paper, signing their names and asking a couple of guys to act as witnesses (62).

A few months later the deal was formed, Lee Strunk steps into a mortar ground, and Jenson mentally feels about the pact. Here, the agreement reflects the encumbers placed on both parties. According to Jenson, he does not want to carry with the guilt of killing one of his comrades but Strunk also have the fear that Jensen will kill him. " Later we heard that Strunk died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight"(63).

Curt Lemon is a young soldier, and he is the best friend of Rat Kiley. When Curt Lemon stepped into a booby trap his face started to shine like the sun. It was not the sun shine, but it was the "rigged 105". Which produces light from the blast. Concerned about his friend's passing away, Kiley writes a letter to Lemon's sister describing his bravery and humanity. He grievously wrote the letter to her but she did not respond to it. It demonstrates that how the soldiers have solitary lives, far from their families. Kiley was more affected by this; it caused him mental and emotional encumbrance. To deal with the harsh realities of life, he reacts more violently. "Rat Kiley was crying. He tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself"(76).

On his part, Henry Dobbins is a different character, who carried a pair of pantyhose because he believed that it would protect him through the most trying circumstances. This demonstrates how much he missed her and how emotionally taxing it was to be without the woman he loved. Aside from emotion, these soldiers lives on battlefield with love, loneliness and dread. Norman Bowker and Henry work together in the military, every evening they have to check everything before it getting dark in the foxhole.

The soldiers were emotionally burdened by the reality that anyone could die in the battlefield at any moment. Lavender and other people who passed away in the battle field illustrate the unpredictability of life there. This is a kind of torture to all the soldiers illuminate the burden of fear that these soldiers carry around them:

Will your flash light go dead? Do rats carry rabies? If you screamed, how far would the sound carry? Would your buddies hear it? Would they have the courage

to drag you out? In some respects, though not many, the waiting was worse than the tunnel itself. Imagination was a killer (10).

The author, who is still emotionally burdened by the effects of the conflict, also provides a comprehensive account of the war's events, including its backdrop. Even though the conflict has long since ended, he still carries the emotional encumbrance. He is not hiding the facts, and he may provide the precise period of the soldier's existence. He merely describes the people who are severely impacted by the horrific character of the war and illustrates its terror. He finds it difficult to admit to his own daughter that he once killed a man in a battle.

Tim, the main character of "The Man I Killed", finds difficulties and feel the burden of Love. He killed a man in the War and it is an example how the soldiers who compelled to serve in Vietnam loved his family deeply and does not want to fall short of their expectations.

He killed a man in the war. He still brings up the incident that occurred ten years ago, and he can still make out the man's face. He thus fully comprehends that he must confront everything because not only he, but also all the soldiers are powerless to choose to forget anything. They are being pressed into combat: "He would have been taught that to defend the land was a man's highest duty and highest privilege. He had accepted this. It was never open to question" (119).

The guy he killed was just a cog in the machine, and he was programmed to save his country. When his daughter was nine years old, she asked a question to him, whether you had killed anyone. However, he was refusing to tell her because, he was unsure of how to explain that he really killed someone. For this reason, he keeps writing war stories and makes an effort to justify his actions too.

He always sustained the stories within himself. He is unable to expunge his recollections or the accounts of his friends because they are all a part of his life and serve as constant reminders of his time in the military. He always carries his friends, memories, stories, the man he killed, the terror, horror, and he will be carrying them until he dies.

I am young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story (233).

O'Brien was able to communicate his true feelings through Story-telling. He was a soldier whose mind, heart, and soul were injured by the trials of battle. He was unable to maintain his silence any longer and through the stories he expresses the pains of the characters. The author articulates not for himself but for everyone who lost their lives during the war. According to Marilyn Wesley, "the Vietnam War is the first Postmodern war that broke down any shared language as a means of rendering experience" (15). Everyone, involved in a War affected especially the soldiers who were forced to fighting. Once they enter the core of darkness, they do face everything. They carry out the bags and their souls also, whatever they carry, but everything is related bear and always moves forward.

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