

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, p. 314—Discussion Questions

I. Group 1: Analyzing the style of O'Brien's short story

1. Read the second paragraph of the story (p. 316). Are the words in this paragraph primarily general or specific, concrete or abstract? Give examples. What is the effect of this word choice?
2. Read paragraphs 11 & 12 (pp. 317-318). About how many sentences are longer than ten words? About how many sentences are shorter than ten words?

What might be significant (the intended effect) of the contrast between the longer and the shorter sentences in these paragraphs?

3. Find examples of parallelism and repetition. What kind of effect do these techniques have on the tone of the writing?
4. Read paragraph 39 (bottom of p. 321 through p. 322). What examples of irony do you find in this paragraph?

Everyone: Be prepared to discuss the style of writing in this paragraph: word choice, imagery, figurative language, sentence type, etc.

II. Group 2: Understanding Meaning and Conflict in "The Things They Carried"

1. What did the men of Jimmy Cross's platoon carry?
2. What do the personal items these men carried reveal about themselves? Discuss at least a couple of examples.
3. What purpose does Lieutenant Cross's imaginings of Martha serve in this story?
How do those fantasies compare with Cross's everyday reality?
4. What do we learn about Jimmy Cross? Why does he blame himself for Lavender's death?
5. What is significant about Jimmy Cross's name?
6. What is the effect of the repetitions in the story (the constant descriptions of how much things weigh, the regular need to carry things, the way in which Lavender died)?

Everyone: Be prepared to identify ironies in the story and to discuss what you think is the conflict in this story and how that conflict is resolved.

What similarities can you see between the situation, the theme, the characters in this story and the themes, situations, and speakers in the war poems we have discussed? Look particularly at Bruce Weigl's poem "Song of Napalm" and Jim Northrup's poetry, for these poems, just as this short story, were inspired by the writers' experiences in the Vietnam War.