

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a work of fiction. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the book more fully.

Tim O'Brien grew up in small-town Minnesota and describes himself as a dreamer, not big enough to compete in sports, who made good grades and loved magic tricks. In 1968, he was drafted into the Army's 46th Infantry and sent to Vietnam. Though politically he was against the war, O'Brien served as a foot soldier in the Quang Ngai province from 1969 until 1970, when he was hit by shrapnel from a hand grenade, earning the Purple Heart and a ticket home.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Book," "Major Characters," and "Tim O'Brien (b. 1946)." Divide the class into three groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group should present what it has learned.

Fiction writers are often advised to "write what you know." Tim O'Brien followed this advice by reflecting on personal experiences and adapting them to create a work of fiction. Discuss the differences between fiction and nonfiction. How might real-life events evolve into a fictional story?

Ask students to consider if it is okay for fiction to have elements of "real" events. Is it acceptable for a nonfiction writer to create moments that never occurred to help expand or explain the story? Are the standards for "truthfulness" in fiction different from those for nonfiction? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a three-paragraph essay on an object they carry now, or one from their childhood. Ask them to describe the object in detail, the mood it evokes, and reasons for its importance.

Homework

Read Handout One: Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction and "The Things They Carried." Ask students to make a list of the soldiers and the special items they carried.

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the book. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Things They Carried was published in 1990, twenty years after Tim O'Brien returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam. By most estimates nearly 9 million men served in the military between 1964 and 1975. Of that number, approximately 3.5 million men served in the Vietnam theatre of operations. The draft called more than 2 million men for military service during the Vietnam era. It has also been credited with “encouraging” many volunteers to join the armed services rather than risk being drafted into combat.

Discussion Activities

Read Handout Two: Conscription and the U.S. Draft and the Reader’s Guide essay “The Vietnam War.” As a class, discuss the pros and cons of instituting a draft during a time of national crisis.

Using the homework assignment, make a list of items that the soldiers in the story carried. Ask your students the following questions: Which, if any, of the items is specific to the time period of the Vietnam War? Which items are timeless? Why might Tim O'Brien choose to give each man specific items in addition to the typical soldier’s gear? What do the items tell us about each soldier’s duties and personality? What do we learn about their hopes and desires?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to imagine that they are going to war and can only take three personal items. Have them write a short essay describing each item and the reason why they want to carry it.

Homework

Read “Love,” “Spin,” and “On the Rainy River.” Have students choose their favorite of the three stories and write a one-paragraph synopsis. Encourage them to think about the ways memory unites these stories.

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of a work of fiction, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Things They Carried defies many of the categorizations to which readers of literary fiction have become accustomed. Critics debate whether the book is a novel or a collection of short stories. The title page offers no help resolving the dispute, simply declaring the book “a work of fiction.” Similarly, readers often wonder whether the book is mostly memoir, or strictly fiction. Mostly narrated by a first-person narrator whose name is the same as the author’s, the similarities between events that take place in O’Brien’s writing and his life are evident. Yet, however cleverly *The Things They Carried* incorporates elements of memoir, it remains a work of fiction because the author invented and embellished the stories within its pages. O’Brien has explained in many interviews that he sees little correlation between “truth” in literature and what actually happened. Instead, O’Brien creates stories that lead readers who have not experienced the horrors of war to an understanding of its emotional and physical toll.

Discussion Activities

The first story, “The Things They Carried,” is written in the third-person point of view. Ask your students how this serves to introduce the rest of the book. Were they surprised when O’Brien switched to first-person point of view and they realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?

Ask several students to share their one-paragraph synopses of the stories they read as a homework assignment. Discuss the ways each of the stories deals with O’Brien’s memories of times before, during, or after the war.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay discussing the differences between memoir and fiction. They might explore one or more of the following questions: Is it acceptable to invent scenes or dialogue when writing a memoir? Why or why not? Is it all right to add elements of real-life events in fiction writing? If so, must the author let the reader know what is factual, and what is not?

Homework

Read “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist.” Ask your students to identify the protagonist of each story.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. The protagonist’s journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a “foil,” has traits that contrast with the protagonist’s and highlight important features of the main character’s personality. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Things They Carried does not follow the narrative arc of a typical novel. Instead, each chapter functions as a separate story that has its own protagonist, setting, and dramatic force. Because the stories are interrelated, O’Brien can weave each of the twenty-two separate chapters together to achieve a unified whole. Though each story has its own main character, it can be argued that the ultimate protagonist of the book is the narrator, Tim O’Brien, who struggles to tell the “truth” about war through extraordinary “acts of remembrance.”

Discussion Activities

Discuss the stories “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist.” Ask students to identify the protagonist and antagonist in each story.

Break your class into groups. Have each group list the titles of the eight stories the class has read so far and the names of the prominent characters from each story. Are some characters emerging as the book’s “major” characters while others have a lesser role? If so, which characters seem to be the most important and why?

Writing Exercise

In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. . . . The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.

Ask students to find an instance where O’Brien’s writing reflects the surreal nature of war and write a short essay on how he achieves this effect. What kinds of truths can surrealism reveal?

Homework

Read “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” Ask your students to identify ways O’Brien uses figurative language such as imagery, simile, and metaphor to enhance the story.

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

The story Rat Kiley tells in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is highly implausible. Ask your class if they feel its lack of believability makes it any less compelling. How much of the story seems real? Is there a moral to Rat Kiley’s story? How does O’Brien’s use of figurative language enhance the reader’s experience?

Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group a topic: the topography of Vietnam, the Green Berets, or Mary Anne’s transformation. Each group should find instances of how O’Brien uses imagery to appeal to the readers’ senses.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay on Mary Anne’s transformation from an innocent high school girl into a predatory killer. How does her gender change the reader’s expectations about her reactions to the war? How does she defy those expectations? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?

Homework

Read “Stockings,” “Church,” “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Style.” Students should review the stories they’ve read, identify at least one object that functions as a symbol, and come to class prepared to discuss its symbolic importance.

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a work of fiction is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the book.

Discussion Activities

There is a great deal of symbolism in *The Things They Carried*. Readers are told in the title story that Henry Dobbins carries his girlfriend's nylons wrapped around his neck. In "Stockings," O'Brien tells the story of how the stockings became a symbol of comfort and protection.

Ask your class to identify some of the many other symbols in the book (i.e., Kiowa's moccasins and feathered hatchet, Mary Anne's tongue necklace, Lieutenant Cross's pebble, the young Vietnamese soldier, Kathleen, Linda, the thumb Norman Bowker carried in Vietnam, and his desire for the Silver Star Medal.) How does the symbolic value of items help the reader better understand the personality of the character? If the character is a symbol, what does that person represent?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short story with a symbol that is central to the plot. Encourage them to use a symbol that does not already have strong meaning attached to it.

Homework

Read "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes." Ask students to review the stories they have read so far and write a short character analysis of Norman Bowker.

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Works of fiction trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the evolution of Norman Bowker's character throughout the book. How does "Speaking of Courage" show us the complex relationship between one man, his fellow soldiers, and his family and friends in his hometown? Does learning about Norman Bowker's post-war life change the way we feel about his actions during the attack that took Kiowa's life? "Speaking of Courage" is the only story other than the title story, "The Things They Carried," that is written in the third-person point of view. Why might O'Brien have chosen this narrative stance?

In "On the Rainy River" O'Brien writes, "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down." Ask your class if they believe there are any heroes in the book. If so, how do they display courage? Does the narrator's opinion of courage change during the course of the book?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a two-page essay considering how "Notes" expands the way we read "Speaking of Courage." How does the last paragraph of "Notes" demonstrate O'Brien's struggle to find the "truth" about the Vietnam War?

Homework

Read "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip." Read Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Structure

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a book either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution or *denouement*, in which the aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

O'Brien mentions the deaths of several of the soldiers before he gives detailed accounts of how and when they died in later stories. Reading "In the Field" and "Field Trip" expands the reader's understanding of Kiowa's death and the narrator's reaction to the events that took place in the field. Yet, in some ways, O'Brien undermines the drama by placing "Good Form" between these two stories. This search for a nebulous and shifting truth provides continuity between the stories and, in some ways, increases the reader's tension by forcing us to question what is real.

Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.

O'Brien writes, "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through the Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it's not a game. It's a form." Ask your class the following questions: What is the relationship between truth and fact in *The Things They Carried*? Why are facts important? How much factual information do we need to understand the truth? How might knowing all the factual information about O'Brien's service in Vietnam hinder us from understanding the book? How does the search for truth enhance the book's plot?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one of the soldiers in the field the night Kiowa dies and write a condolence letter from that character to Kiowa's family. Ask students to consider why they choose to include some information and leave out other facts.

Homework

Read "The Ghost Soldiers." Have students identify at least three themes explored in *The Things They Carried*.

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a book. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. Literature often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

The Things They Carried explores the social pressures the soldiers faced, both in choosing whether or not to serve in Vietnam and in the way they conducted themselves while on patrol. It also examines each soldier's personal moral code and, more subtly, the politics surrounding the Vietnam War. Throughout the book, O'Brien challenges the reader to consider what constitutes truth and whether a well-told story can transcend the limits of fiction.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Discuss the themes identified during the previous night's homework. Then, as a writing assignment or group activity, explore the following themes:

Social Pressure

Many of the soldiers' actions are the result of social pressure: O'Brien's unwillingness to dodge the draft by fleeing to Canada even though he opposed the war, the dark humor the unit displays in the villages, and the fact that they would kill and die "because they were embarrassed not to." Ask your class to identify instances where social pressure affects a character or the unit as a whole. Is this pressure positive or is it a negative influence? Have students support their answers with passages from the text.

Personal Moral Code

Divide students into small working groups. Assign each group a character and ask them to write a short analysis of the character's individual moral code by quoting passages from the book. Have each group share its findings. How do the characters' morals differ from one another? How are they the same?

Truth

O'Brien plays with the line between fact and fiction throughout the book. "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened . . . and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain." Ask your class to discuss ways O'Brien blurs the lines between reality and imagination. How does this contribute to our understanding of the war?



Homework

Read "Night Life" and "The Lives of the Dead."



10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great book is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

The Things They Carried is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of literature about the Vietnam War. Robert Harris, book editor for the *New York Times*, wrote:

Only a handful of novels and short stories have managed to clarify, in any lasting way, the meaning of the war in Vietnam for America and for the soldiers who served there.

Tim O'Brien captures the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers. But he goes much further. By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth, he places *The Things They Carried* high up on the list of best fiction about any war.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. Do they agree with Robert Harris's review of *The Things They Carried*? A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Tim O'Brien create in *The Things They Carried*? What elevates a work of fiction to greatness?

Ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Things They Carried*? Is this a great book? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay exploring their personal reactions to *The Things They Carried*. Students should go beyond expressing like or dislike. Ask them to make a list of emotions they felt while reading the book, and to examine why. Which characters and scenes did they relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Was the resolution of the book satisfying? Comforting? Disturbing? Why?

Homework

Have students choose from the list of Essay Topics. Ask students to come to the next class with a draft of their essay.

Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction

A critical success since its publication in 1990, *The Things They Carried* is considered one of the most valuable contributions to Vietnam War literature. Readers often disagree on the genre of the book. It is sometimes regarded as a group of interconnected short stories instead of a novel. Certainly each story—or chapter—stands alone successfully. Several of the stories were originally published in such magazines as *Esquire*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Playboy*, and *Gentleman's Quarterly*. Yet the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

The Things They Carried is told mainly from the first-person point of view of a narrator named Tim O'Brien who shares many of the same experiences as the author. There are two stories in the book that are not told from this perspective. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to alter the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers should ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action of *The Things They Carried* takes place in Vietnam. Readers should be aware of changes in setting and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

O'Brien uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *The Things They Carried*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story's meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it's important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way the Vietnam War affects the soldiers in Alpha Company.



Conscription and the U.S. Draft

Although the United States Constitution does not directly mention the word “draft” (or even the older term—“conscription”), it does give Congress certain power. Article I, Section 8, states that Congress shall have the power to declare war; raise and support armies; maintain a navy; and provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining a militia.

In both peacetime and periods of conflict, men have been drafted to fill specific needs in our country’s armed forces. The draft in the United States is administered by the Selective Service System. On September 16, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act, which created the country’s first peacetime draft and formally established the agency. Even today, men ages 18 through 25 are required to register with the Selective Service. This provides a way for Congress to fill vacancies in the armed forces which cannot be filled through voluntary means.

During the Vietnam War, there were not enough volunteers to staff the military. A lottery was held on December 1, 1969, to determine the order of call for men of draft age. Three-hundred-sixty-six capsules containing birth dates were placed in a large glass container and drawn by hand to establish the order in which men would be drafted. The first birth date was assigned the number 1, meaning the men with that birth date would be called first. The drawing continued until all days of the year had been paired with numbers. Families across the country hoped their young men would get a high number.

Conscription has always been controversial, but during the Vietnam War draft evasion and resistance reached levels that hampered the war effort and ultimately helped end the conflict. Many draft resisters filed for conscientious objector status. A conscientious objector can declare that military service or combat duty is counter to his religious or moral beliefs, but must be able to demonstrate that the objection is long-lasting and sincere.

Some men facing the draft fled to Canada. As antiwar protests took hold on college campuses, students began burning their draft cards as acts of defiance. Though resisting the draft can carry stiff fines and even prison sentences, during the Vietnam War there were far too many people to punish. In 1977, President Carter granted amnesty to all those who had fled abroad in defiance of the draft, allowing them to return to the United States.

Although the U.S. does not currently have an active draft, young men must register so that, should a draft ever be instituted, the Selective Service will have lists of those eligible to serve. Since September 11, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have kept the idea of reinstating the draft in the public’s mind, but Congress has rejected all bills that call for conscription, and all the troops serving in the U.S. military have enlisted voluntarily.



The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre

The Quang Ngai Province, located on the south central coast of Vietnam, was targeted early in the Vietnam War because U.S. military officials suspected it of being a Viet Cong stronghold. By the end of 1967, most of the homes in the province had been destroyed and many thousands of civilians were homeless.

On March 16, 1968, the soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai six miles northeast of Quang Ngai. The company had sustained many casualties in the area over the previous weeks and emotions ran high. The troops, under the leadership of Lt. William Calley, entered the village firing although there were no reports of enemy fire. Eyewitnesses reported seeing old men bayoneted, women raped, and unarmed villagers—including children—shot in the back of the head.

Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam well after the horrific events of My Lai had taken place, but *The Things They Carried* examines the desensitization and brutality many troops experienced. In 1994, O'Brien accepted an assignment from the *New York Times* to return to Vietnam and write an article about it. "The Vietnam in Me" described O'Brien's experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry, and his reaction to the massacre at My Lai.

In the article, O'Brien writes:

What happened, briefly, was this. At approximately 7:30 on the morning of March 16, 1968, a company of roughly 115 American soldiers were inserted by helicopter just outside the village of My Lai. They met no resistance. No enemy. No incoming fire. Still, for the next four hours, Charlie Company killed whatever could be killed. They killed chickens. They killed dogs and cattle. They killed people, too. Lots of people. Women, infants, teen-agers, old men. [...]

Eventually, after a cover-up that lasted more than

a year and after the massacre made nationwide headlines, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison. Found guilty of the premeditated murder of "not less than" 22 civilians, Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but after legal appeals and sentence reductions, his ultimate jail time amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison[...]

Calley aside, only a handful of men faced formal court-martial proceedings, either for war crimes or for subsequent cover-up activities, with the end result of five acquittals and four judicially ordered dismissals. [...]

Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.

Americans first learned of My Lai in November 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* based on his conversations with Ron Ridenhour. A Vietnam veteran, Ridenhour learned of the events from members of Charlie Company. He had immediately appealed to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon, asking them to investigate the matter. In September 1969, as a result of a military investigation, Lt. Calley was charged with murder in the deaths of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

When Hersh's story hit the press two months later, it had even farther-reaching effects. As the shocking details of the massacre reached the public, support for the war began to wane, more draftees began to file for conscientious objector status, and U.S. draft policy was reexamined. A military commission found widespread failures of leadership and discipline among the troops of Charlie Company. For his story, Seymour Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for international reporting.

