

Study Guide – The Things They Carried

PART I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT – please READ and ANNOTATE the following information

"My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam—not just in the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam."

- Tim O'Brien



Vietnam has a history of fighting for its independence. Though Vietnam had long been a French colony, the Vietnamese resisted French influence. In early 1946, the French did assent to recognizing limited Vietnamese independence and Ho Chi Minh as the leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. During that year, a guerilla army called the Vietminh attacked French military forces and provoked the French into war, in which the US supported their French allies throughout US President Harry Truman's time in the White House. The French began to reassert their power over Vietnam, but the communist Chinese and Soviet governments allied themselves with Ho Chi Minh.

The head of the French-recognized faction, Bao Dai, claimed that his party—and not Ho Chi Minh's—had authority to lead the country. By 1950, Truman had begun sending American military advisors to Vietnam to support the French. Eventually, the US began to give financial support to France's conflict with Ho Chi Minh supporters. Internal division within Vietnam escalated. Fearing the threat of Communism in Asia, the US, during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, continued supporting the French, until the number of U.S. military personnel deployed to Southeast Asia numbered nearly 20,000. Under the Johnson administration, North Vietnamese boats fired on US warships, leading President Johnson to order an aerial assault of North Vietnam. A few days after this, Congress passed the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, extending to the president the necessary authority to conduct war, though war was never officially declared.

After this, combat-ready American soldiers were deployed to US Marine headquarters at Da Nang in March, 1965. American involvement steadily increased, and by the end of 1967 over a million American troops were in Vietnam, despite the growing sentiment of the American public to stop or withdraw from the war. After years of intense battle, much of it against guerillas in the jungle, the US withdrew the last combat troops in March 1973. More than 1.2 million Americans served in the war; nearly 60,000 died in service. Ironically, the American objective—preventing Vietnam from becoming a communist foothold—was never realized. In April 1975, Saigon surrendered to the communist revolutionaries; the following year, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was declared, led by Ho Chi Minh.

The following background to the Vietnam War will help you understand more deeply why the American war in Vietnam had such an impact on those directly involved, as well as those “back home” in the United States.

Excerpted from **The Norton Book of Modern War** (“The Wars in Asia,” pages 651-656), edited by historian **Paul Fussell**.

VIETNAM

It is not easy to date the beginning of the Vietnam War accurately. Struggle between the organized poor of French Indochina, as it used to be called, and various foreign occupiers had been standard for decades, but the United States first became involved in a small way in 1950, when Truman sent thirty-five noncombatant “advisers” to help the French maintain their colonial authority, menaced by the Viet Minh, a radical guerrilla army. After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu² in the French began leaving the country, and a peace conference in Geneva divided the country at the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh in charge of the Communist north and Ngo Dinh Diem Prime Minister of the non-Communist south. In 1956 more American advisers arrived to train a South Vietnamese army, and the first American killed, in 1961, was one of these.

The administration of President Kennedy now began increasing support of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN, or Army of the Republic of Vietnam), and by December 1961, American planes and helicopters were introduced into the scene and the number of American troops, increasingly conceived less as advisers than combatants, reached 15,000. By 1964, assisted by the famous Tonkin Gulf incident³—the pugnacious Lyndon Johnson claimed an attack on American ships,



which only doubtfully took place—the Americans had become more bellicose and were bombing North Vietnam, the motivator of its South Vietnamese guerrilla arm, the Viet Cong. At the same time, Viet Cong operations became more and more unsettling: mines secretly implanted, murders of civilians assisting the Americans, destruction by mortars and artillery of American airfields, planes, and bases. By 1965 American marines and soldiers were pouring into the country, their number finally amounting to half a million. They seemed to be doing not badly at establishing an atmosphere in which the South Vietnamese

government could survive, until January 1968, when the Viet Cong chose Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, as the date for immensely destructive attacks on Saigon, the capital (including the United States Embassy), and forty other cities. In retrospect, Tet came to seem the Stalingrad⁴ of the Vietnam War. It was a turning point, the undeniable beginning of American defeat.

By the late 1960s, American opposition to the war grew strident. The war was illegal, many said; it was immoral, colonialist, cruel, and unnecessary, and those directing it were simply war criminals. Richard Nixon came into office promising to end the war. His plan was to withdraw American troops gradually, replacing them with beefed-up equivalent forces from the ARVN, and to increase the bombing of North Vietnam to persuade that country to make peace. By 1970 the war had spread to neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and in the early 1970s everything began to come apart. The My Lai massacre, when hundreds of unarmed civilians, including infants and old women, were shot to death by angry U.S. Army troops, became known and was perceived less as an aberration than as an entirely representative atrocity. Anti-war demonstrations became

¹ Tim O'Brien, "An Interview with Tim O'Brien," Steven Kaplan, *Missouri Review* 14: 1991: 94-108.

² Dien Bien Phu: the final Indochina war battle in 1954 between the French and the Viet Minh communist revolutionaries.

³ Tonkin Gulf incident: On 2 August 1964, the destroyer USS Maddox engaged three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, resulting in Vietnamese casualties. Two days later, a second incident was alleged by the U.S. National Security Agency (in 2005 it was concluded that there was, in fact, no battle). As a result of these two incidents, US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, granting President Lyndon B. Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be jeopardized by "communist aggression." This was Johnson's legal justification for deploying U.S. forces to begin open warfare against North Vietnam.

⁴ Stalingrad: 1942-1943 battle between Nazi Germany and USSR for city of Stalingrad, one of the bloodiest battles in military history, resulting in 2 million deaths; Soviet victory made Germany's push into the East a failure.

more indignant. Protesters were beaten and, at Kent State University, killed. Troop morale began to erode, and soldiers stepped up their rate of such subversive behaviors as "combat refusals" (i.e., mutinies), open hard-drug dependence, and the killing of unpopular officers. In Washington, the Watergate scandal, the result of the President's paranoia about "national security" leaks and anger at the apparently treasonous behavior of those opposing the war, brought down the government and removed from the war any pretense of legitimacy and appropriateness it ever had. In 1973 the last American troops left. Deprived of this support, ARVN collapsed, and in May 1975, the war ended when North Vietnamese troops and tanks entered Saigon and united Vietnam into one Communist country, or as some might say, replaced in the south one tyranny by another. At the end, the television audience at home was vouchsafed disgraceful scenes of wild terror in the too-long-delayed evacuations of right-wing Vietnamese and American diplomatic personnel.⁵ It was a fitting scandal to end a war which had seldom seemed less than a scandal.

The whole performance which, lasting for about fifteen years, constituted America's longest war, was costly: its price was almost 2 million dead in Vietnam, 200,000 in Cambodia, 100,000 in Laos. Over 3 million were wounded in Southeast Asia, and 14 million became refugees. Of the American troops and marines, 58,135 were killed. Over 300,000 people were wounded, of whom 33,000 are permanently paralyzed. The price in American civil disruption and the augmenting of cynicism and contempt for the government was high also. Thousands of young people evaded the draft either by enrolling in college—the law surprisingly permitted this open validation of privilege and the class system—or by fleeing the country for Canada

⁵ See the embassy evacuation scene: go to YouTube and search "Vietnam Saigon Evacuation," a news report from the British channel ITN.

or Sweden. By the end of the war more people than one might expect could agree with I. F. Stone that "Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed."



The lies were largely about the virtues of the South Vietnamese government and the combat adequacy of the South Vietnamese army. The government was grossly unrepresentative, a Roman Catholic autocracy governing a Buddhist majority, and its armed forces seemed to fight with the knowledge that defeat was inevitable, and besides, pimping and selling supplies were more profitable than duty. Those familiar with the Second World War in Europe can appreciate what Vietnam became by imagining French civilians and soldiers secretly selling to the Germans weapons and supplies conveyed to them, often at mortal risk, by the Allies. One marine officer, whose unit fought alongside elements of ARVN, testifies: "Every, every, every,

every firefight that we got into, the ARVN fucking ran." Until the My Lai episode became public, the lies also had to cover the noisome fact that the enemies being shot down by American troops often consisted of unarmed civilians suspected of sympathy toward the Viet Cong, and that often these civilians were women and children and the elderly living in villages thought to be centers of Viet Cong activity. The official lies had to gloss over feelings like those in a letter left at home by one soldier to be opened if he did not return. When he was killed, his parents opened the letter to read,

Dear Mom and Dad: The war that has taken my life, and many thousands of others before me, is immoral, unlawful, and an atrocity.

And all along, until near the end when the Americans were obviously in flight, the lies had to assure the electorate that the United States was "winning," and that if it was leaving, it was placing the cause in the hands of the sturdy, honest, well-trained, and self-respecting South Vietnamese, who would surely win. The lies also had to conceal the number of ARVN officers were

really Viet Cong agents and the likelihood that some high government officials, like Truong Nhu Tang, were secretly aiding the Viet Cong because they sympathized with the cause of apparent social justice represented by the north.

The reasons for American defeat and humiliation were

many. One was a complacent ignorance of Asian social and political conventions, languages, and history and a lack of imaginative identification with the miserable and the poverty-stricken. Another was reliance on a showy but inappropriate technology to fight a war essentially social and political. The American army was trained to fight wars like the last European one, where victory resulted

from the seizure and occupation of enemy terrain and where the killing of the enemy was only incidental to this end. Confronted with a very different challenge, a war where anyone might be an enemy and where the enemy was unidentifiable and everywhere, the army had no solution but to kill people, uniformed or not, old or young, male or female, proven Viet Cong or not. It was almost as if the German practice in the Second World War of widespread massacres of guerrillas in the interest of “pacification” had now been embraced by the Americans, who seemed to advertise their contempt for human life in general by the technique of the announced “body count” of the presumed enemy. As one American public-relations official finally admitted, “We were looking for quantitative measurements in a war that was qualitative.”

The Second World War provided the American Air Force with a rationale for its contribution, the saturation bombing of civilian targets in North Vietnam, despite evidence gathered by the Strategic Bombing Survey suggesting that the bombing of civilian targets actually increases the enemy’s will to resist. Regardless, the Air Force dropped on the Communists three times the bomb tonnage dropped in the whole of the Second World War, with little more effect than to pockmark the agricultural countryside with craters. But if hamstrung by precedents from the Second World War, the military in Vietnam did make some changes in their procedures. One was in response to what the Second War had revealed about the inevitability of psychiatric breakdown if troops have to fight too long without hope of ultimate

reprieve – except that provided by death or serious injury. In Vietnam a soldier served one year and then was returned to stateside duty. But while psychologically intelligent, this proved militarily inconvenient, for units now consisted not of men who knew each other from way back but of virtual visitors no one could count on absolutely.



Another difference from earlier wars was the new emphasis on Rest and Recreation (“R and R”) as a relief from the strain of combat. Every soldier was entitled to his holiday in the bars and whorehouses of Tokyo or Bangkok, where he found an atmosphere not refreshingly different from the one in Saigon.

R and R was especially required in this war because of the terrible things the troops had to do and see, and because of their anger at the Vietnamese, both North and South, and their frustration and fear at the absence of a front line and a locatable enemy. The American emphasis on the body count quite dehumanized the Viet Cong, making routine the behavior described by journalist Phillip Knightley:

The Americans mutilated bodies. One colonel wanted the hearts cut out of dead Vietcong to feed to his dog. . . Ears were strung together like beads. Parts of Vietnamese bodies were kept as trophies; skulls were a favorite and the then Colonel George Patton III—“I do like to see the arms and legs fly”—carried one about at his farewell party. The Americans photographed dead Vietnamese as if they were game trophies. . . The Twenty-fifth Infantry Division left a “visiting card,” a torn-off shoulder patch of the division’s emblem, stuffed in the mouth of the Vietnamese they killed.

Condemned to sadistic lunacy like this, the troops developed the particular sardonic-jokey style, half-ironic, totally subversive, which is the hallmark of Vietnam War rhetoric. One popular saying among the troops was “A sucking chest wound is nature’s own way of telling you war is hell.” They held up two fingers in a “V” as a peace signal, and they exhibited everywhere they could, on helmet covers, rifle stocks, or medallions worn around the neck, the nuclear-disarmament peace logo. Because the war seemed run along business lines, with quantitative results expected, and because killing became so routine, mock business cards and

mock ads flourished, a satire of both management style and the fraudulence of publicity. One helicopter gunship commander dropped visiting cards on his victims reading, "Congratulations. You have been killed through courtesy of the 361st." Another helicopter company which named itself the Kingsmen issued cards designating its specialties—"VC Extermination," "People Sniffer and Defoliation"—and promised to provide "Death and Destruction 24 Hours a Day." It concluded: "If you care enough to send the very best, ⁶ send THE KINGSMEN." This mode resembled the normal irony practiced by troops in modern war, but now the irony was twisted and turned by hatred and anger into something close to sarcasm. On one vehicle was neatly painted: "Vietnam: Love It or Leave It."

This sarcastic tendency suggests that in its style the Vietnam War may be more than a modern one. It may be a "post-modern" one. That term, denoting certain kinds of contemporary writing and art which press beyond the "modern" to something even more skeptical, problematic, and even nihilistic seems applicable to this war which so seriously damaged the remaining clichés of patriotism and heroism. "In the end," says one observer, "I came to believe that the war was destroying the U.S. Army." One characteristic of post-modern procedure in the arts is a self-consciousness bordering on contempt about the very medium or genre one is working in, amounting to disdain for the public respect and even awe that normally attend such artifacts—the works of Andy Warhol are a well-known example. The correspondent Eddie Adams remembers reporting and photographing techniques in Vietnam: "We used to go out in teams," he recalls, "so that if one of us got blown away, the other could cover it. A bit sick." That can suggest the way the troops regarded their capture and degradation by the war. Lionel Trilling once spoke of the "modern" movement in culture as "the legitimation of the subversive"—and that definition applies with increasing intensity to the tendency called post-modern.

Because of the lies the home-front audience had been fed, soldiers returning finally from Vietnam had more trouble than usual trying to persuade some civilians that the war had been shamefully nasty. One paralyzed ex-marine lieutenant, addressing an audience on Long Island, was trying to depict

for them the war as it was:

This woman stands up and says, "I object to your use of obscenity." I said, "What did I say?" A guy said, "You used the word 'bullshit.'" I said, "You know, it's amazing. I'm talking to matter of policy, and what you relate to as an

obscenity is the word 'bullshit.' What would you do if I said, 'Fuck you?'" This was in a full auditorium. It was total pandemonium. In the aisles, ranting and raving.



"In Vietnam," wrote journalist John Mecklin, "a major American policy was wrecked, in part, by unadorned reporting of what was going on." ... All [reporting] is courageous, and most is informed by an uncompromised moral sense... a confrontation with the monstrous and the unbelievable. That is what writing about Vietnam had to be, but looking back, one sees that that is what writing about all modern war inevitably must be.

⁶ "when you care enough to send the very best": this phrase was used in a famous American commercial for Hallmark-brand cards.

NOVEL GLOSSARY of Common US Military Terms

- AO: area of operation
- KIA: killed in action
- LP: Listening Patrol
- LSA: cleaner and lubricant for weapons
- LZ: landing zone
- M-60: machine gun
- M-16: standard military rifle
- PFC: private first class
- RTO: Radio and Telephone Operator
- PRC-25: portable radio communication (pronounced "prick 25"), backpack-size radio
- Psy Ops: psychological warfare (Ops = operations) R&R: rest and relaxation
- RTO: radio telephone operator SOP: standard operating procedure
- USO: United Service Organization (Volunteer Entertainment and Morale)
- VC: Viet Cong soldiers fighting the Americans

CHARACTERS & SETTING:

Author Tim O'Brien was an infantryman (foot soldier) in Vietnam from 1968-1970 in 3rd Platoon, Company A (Alpha). One fascinating thing about TTTTC is the mix of truth and fiction: O'Brien has a character in the novel named Tim O'Brien. Although O'Brien uses time shifts in the story, the tour of duty of the Alpha Company soldiers in *The Things They Carried* is thought to be from 1968-1969. Also, you will see that the physical setting of the novel shifts between Vietnam (mostly Quang Ngai province on the central coast) and the United States.

SOLDIERS IN ALPHA COMPANY, of the American Army during the Vietnam War. Keep in mind that these soldiers are only a few years older than you.

- **Tim O'Brien:** *fictional persona* of O'Brien the writer, protagonist and storyteller of the novel; from the state of Minnesota, in the Midwest.
- **Kiowa:** Native American Baptist who keeps a Bible with him, O'Brien's closest friend in Vietnam.
- **Lieutenant (Lt.) Jimmy Cross:** their leader, 24 years old.
- **Norman Bowker**
- **Rat Kiley:** the medic
- **Curt Lemon**
- **Azar**
- **Henry Dobbins:** the machine gunner.
- **Mitchell Sanders:** the RTO [see above]
- **Ted Lavender**
- **Dave Jensen**
- **Lee Strunk**
- **Bobby Jorgenson:** medic who replaces Rat Kiley

AT TRA BONG AREA MEDIC CAMP

- **Eddie Diamond:** highest-ranking officer at the Camp.
- **Mark Fossie:** the medic who brings his girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, over to Vietnam from the U.S.

IN THE UNITED STATES

- **Martha:** Cross's girlfriend, whose picture he has in Vietnam.
- **Kathleen:** O'Brien's daughter, who returns to Vietnam with him.
- **Linda:** elementary-school girlfriend of O'Brien.
- **Timmy:** elementary-school persona of O'Brien, loved Linda.
- **Nick Veenhof:** elementary classmate of O'Brien and Linda.

SOME MOTIFS and SYMBOLS:

- truth/lies
- "story-truth" versus "happening-truth"
- storytelling
- communication
- tangible/intangible weight
- ambiguity
- leadership
- savior/Christ figure
- shame as tied to courage
- the aftermath of war
- religion/spirituality
- perception
- alienation/isolation
- hunger
- silence
- music
- spirits
- eyes and ears
- fog

SOME TECHNIQUES:

- figurative language
- image contrasts such as dark/light
- allusion
- repetition
- antithesis
- parallelism
- polysyndeton
- paradox
- verbal/situational irony
- (in)direct characterization
- flashback/forward
- magical realism

NARRATIVE METHOD:

One of the reasons this novel is such an essential text in our study is its post- modern storytelling techniques and complex narration. While you read, it is important that you think about *HOW* it is told (e.g point of view, reliability of narration, plot structure). In the title story, the third-person narrator is unidentified, but, in other stories, he is a "fictional character named Tim O'Brien," explains Tim O'Brien, the author. He describes the soldiers and events in Quang Ngai province. This narrator is omniscient, since he is privy to the interior thoughts and feelings other characters, especially Lt. Jimmy Cross; yet, the narrator is a third person limited omniscient narrator in that he only reveals **partial, fragmented, or incomplete information** about the characters and events of the story. However, you will see that in most of the stories, the point of view is first person. Besides O'Brien's complex and shifting narrative point of view, you will see that the structure of the story is also complex: a fragmented and nonlinear narrative, moving within and between memory and present day. Tracing this unusual storytelling method and understanding why O'Brien chose it is one of the pleasures of studying this novel.

PART 2: CHAPTER QUESTIONS

The following questions are designed to help you engage in a meaningful way with the story, characters, and ultimate purpose of *The Things They Carried*. Questions are separated by chapter. You must respond in complete, TYPED sentences to 50 of the questions that follow. Your selections must EQUALLY SPAN the entirety of the text. As there are 22 chapters in all, aim for roughly 2 questions per chapter. Be sure to label your responses with their corresponding chapters!

NOTE: At the start of the new school term, you will be given registration information for our class section in TurnItIn. Your first homework grade will be to upload these responses!

"The Things They Carried"

1. Explain the title, "The Things They Carried." What is the first carried item that is detailed? What does it show about its carrier?
2. What are the literal and figurative things the soldiers carried? What do the items reveal about their carriers? In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item did you find most evocative of the war? Which items are particularly notable or memorable to you?
3. What are interpretations of the metaphor of "weight"? What is tangible, intangible?
4. Why does the narrator focus on the actual weight of items, the specific number?
5. If Jimmy Cross knows that Martha doesn't love him, why is he so focused on her? What does Martha represent to him?
6. Why does O'Brien have one of the characters die in the very first story?
7. What is the tone and mood during the tunnel search? What effect does it have on the reader?
8. Why does Jimmy Cross burn Martha's letters and photos? How does he change after he burns them? Is this change good?

"Love"

1. The first story in *The Things They Carried* was told in the third person, but now the point of view switches. Who is the speaker? What effect did it have on your experience of the novel when O'Brien switched to first person?
2. What are the ties between this story and the first?
3. What does the story show about the lives of war veterans?
4. What effect does it have on the book in having the narrator be a writer?

"Spin"

1. This story is composed of a lot of fragments. What is the effect of so many short pieces? What could it be showing?
2. How does the tone of the story reflect the idea of a post-modern war (mentioned in the Fussell background information from the *Norton Book of Modern War*)?
3. Why does O'Brien have the narrator refer to events to come? Does it spoil the drama and suspense, or does it enhance it?
4. What effect does it have on the reader to find out that the narrator is named Tim O'Brien, the same name as the author?
5. What contrasts and ironies are in this story?
6. According to the narrator, what is the role of storytelling?

"On the Rainy River"

1. "On the Rainy River" begins with the narrator's lengthy comment on his reluctance to tell the story. Why hasn't he told it before? What took him so long to tell it? Why is he ashamed?
2. In the first two pages of the story, notice the diction of negation (*never...not...not...*) and shame (*embarrassment, squirm, shame*), along with the use of hypothetical statements (*if...if...*), as well as his excessive use of question marks. What is significant about these writing techniques?
3. What is the tone as the narrator describes his life before he is drafted and after receiving the draft letter? What is his view of himself, his place in the world?
4. What is notable about his job at the meatpacking plant? How might it be metaphorical? What parallels are there between him and the pigs?
5. "On the Rainy River" deals with the narrator's painful struggle after he receives his draft notice. What is the moral struggle he faces? What are his fears? What people or things factor into his dilemma?

6. In the story we learn the 21-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage: "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. It was a comforting theory." What do you think about his decision to go to war and not flee into Canada? He calls himself a coward. Do you agree? If he had made the opposite decision, what would he have been? What might the adult O'Brien's theory of courage be?
7. Examine the paragraph in which the narrator compares Bergdahl to the river, the late-summer sun, God, and gods "who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them." What does the old man represent? What does Elroy Bergdahl do that leads O'Brien to call him "the hero of my life"?

"Enemies"

1. One of the interesting things to analyze in *The Things They Carried* is the juxtaposition of stories. Why do you think O'Brien placed "Enemies" directly after "On the Rainy River"?
2. Do you notice anything interesting about the sound of the language O'Brien uses to describe Dave Jensen's beating of Lee Strunk?

"Friends"

1. Why does Strunk's death "relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight"?

"How to Tell a True War Story"

1. O'Brien offers several definitions for a "true war story" throughout "How to Tell a True War Story." What are the qualities of a "true war story," according to O'Brien? What is O'Brien's definition of "truth"? What is his role in this book as soldier, as storyteller? In O'Brien's definition, how are the stories of Curt Lemon's death and the LP's (listening patrol's) experience true war stories?
2. "Unreliable narrator" is the literary term for a narrator whose credibility is compromised by lack of information, bias, his or her mental state, or a deliberate desire to deceive. How are the soldiers who tell stories (such as Sanders and O'Brien) unreliable narrators?
3. What does Mitchell Sanders mean when he tells O'Brien, "Hear that quiet, man? That quiet—just listen. There's your moral"?
4. Why does Rat Kiley torture the baby buffalo? How do you explain his and his squad's reaction as they watch him?
5. How does O'Brien use paradox in this story?
6. What is notable about the last paragraph of the story? What does it mean? What writing techniques are used?
7. What is the reason for and effect of the repetition of the story of Curt Lemon's death in this story?

"The Dentist"

1. What does this short piece show about the notion of bravery? About mental versus physical pain?
2. Readers learn about this dentist story of Lemon and, earlier, about how he died—what general message about war seems to be suggested by these two stories?

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"

1. What is Rat Kiley's reputation as a storyteller? How is he an unreliable narrator? What does he do to the truth, and why?
2. Mary Anne Bell is obviously an important and emblematic character in this book. How might she illustrate society, or war, or human nature? Does it matter that Mary Anne is a young woman? What does her story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?
3. Coming just one story after "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien seems to want us to think of those issues of truth and fiction when examining the highly fantastical story that Rat tells in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Does it fit O'Brien's criteria for a true war story? Is it believable? About Mary Anne, Rat Kiley says that "at least she was real". Do you agree with him? If not, does its possible lack of believability make it any less compelling?
4. Among other techniques, O'Brien uses different diction to show Mary Anne's change, imagery of eyes/watching/staring, dark/light, and hunger/devouring. Find examples and analyze them.
5. There are some interesting aspects of storytelling in this piece. How effective is Rat Kiley as a storyteller? To what extent is he or his story reliable? What is Mitchell Sanders' comment about storytellers? Sanders wants Rat to "tell it right"—what does this mean? How might Sanders' comments reflect the opinions or reactions of certain readers of *The Things They Carried*?

"Stockings"

1. How is Henry Dobbins a metaphor for the United States?
2. What do the pantyhose represent to him? What do they do for him?
3. What diction of religion and spirituality does O'Brien use in this story, and why?

"Church"

1. Why do you think the monks treat Henry Dobbins the way they do? What is Dobbins' views of religion? What is ironic about his actions and words?
2. Why does Kiowa think it's "bad news...all wrong" for them to spend several days at the pagoda? How might their stay be metaphoric?
3. This story shows Kiowa as a foil to Dobbins. How does he respond to Dobbins, and what does he show about himself?

"The Man I Killed"

1. The story opens with one extraordinary, and extraordinarily long, sentence. What is notable about it, and why does O'Brien begin this way?
2. How does O'Brien use description and repetition in this story? What images get repeated, and why? Why does O'Brien juxtapose beautiful and grotesque imagery?
3. What sort of person does O'Brien imagine the man he killed to have been? What is O'Brien's tone when imagining and thinking about the man? How is the man like O'Brien?
4. What is Kiowa's role in this story? Why does he tell O'Brien that it was a "good kill"?
5. How is O'Brien's reaction to the death similar to the earlier reactions to Lavender's and Lemon's deaths?
6. This story is told from the first-person perspective of O'Brien, but what happens to the "I" in this piece, and why?

"Ambush"

1. What is significant about this story coming right after the previous one? Contrast the stories. Why is "Ambush" more obviously told in the first person, and for whom?
2. With what diction and techniques does O'Brien describe the ambush?
3. What does it show about O'Brien as a soldier when he says, "I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it"? What does it show about O'Brien as a *person* when he says soon after, "It occurred to me then that he was about to die. I wanted to warn him"?
4. How does O'Brien end the story? (Notice the verb forms.) Why does he end it this way?

"Style"

1. What does the title mean? What broader ideas are revealed by the story?
2. What does Henry Dobbins do to Azar, and why? What does it show about him? (Recall his words in "Church" as well.)

"Speaking of Courage"

1. As one of the most poignant pieces in the book, this story moves forward in time to focus on the aftermath of war. Why does Norman Bowker struggle to re-integrate into his small Iowa town? What aspects and details of the town does Bowker focus on?
2. What is symbolic about the drive, the lake (and the "shit field"), the medals Bowker earned?
3. What is significant about themes of communication, inexpressiveness, and storytelling and audience in this story?
4. Throughout the story, why does O'Brien use the present conditional verb form "would"? What is the role of the unreal, the imagined in this story?
5. How does Bowker feel about not being able to "bring himself to be uncommonly brave"? What does he say prevented him from pulling Kiowa out of the mud? What is his definition of courage? What is Bowker's tone when thinking about the incident and his actions?
6. Norman stops the Chevy twice in the story. What does the stop at the A&W show about the town and Norman's place in it? What do you make of the last paragraph in the park?
7. Aside from "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage" is the only other story written in third person. Why do you think O'Brien made this choice? What does he achieve by doing so?

"Notes"

1. What is the impact of the first sentence? The last sentence? What is the impact of using excerpts from Bowker's letter?

2. How is O'Brien's post-war experience different from Bowker's? How does O'Brien feel about this contrast?
3. In what ways and to what effect does O'Brien mix truth and fiction? Does your appreciation of "Speaking of Courage" change when you learn in this story, "Notes," that some parts are invented? What do you learn from "Notes" that affects your understanding of Bowker's actions and feelings in the previous story?
4. What is the role of storytelling for O'Brien? What do we learn about the act of writing?

"In the Field"

1. What is the point of view of this story? How do you know? Why is this narrative choice significant? What other stories use this point of view?
2. How does O'Brien use setting in this story?
3. Norman Bowker says, "'Nobody's fault...Everybody's'"; O'Brien writes, "When a man died, there had to be blame.". What does this rule do to the men of O'Brien's company? Are they justified in thinking themselves at fault? How do they cope with their own feelings of culpability?
4. Who is the unnamed young soldier that Jimmy Cross watches and speaks to? Why is it interesting that the soldier is unnamed, and that Cross doesn't remember his name?
5. What do we learn about Cross's thoughts and feelings about being a leader? Why doesn't Cross get angry with the young soldier for searching for the picture instead of searching for Kiowa? In what way is this Jimmy Cross different from the first story in the book? How has he changed? What is the connection between O'Brien the writer/narrator and Cross the leader/letter writer?
6. In what way does the character Azar develop in this story?

"Good Form"

1. What is the difference between "happening-truth" and "story-truth"? Is one or the other more "honest"?
2. Why does O'Brien cast doubt on the truth of his entire narrative at this point? Why is he so willing to call the truth of the whole story into question? Why take that risk of alienating his audience? How is this narrative tension one of the central points of the book? Does it make you more or less interested in the novel? Does it increase or decrease your understanding? Is O'Brien a wholly unreliable narrator now?
3. How does Kathleen seem to represent and speak for the reader/audience?

"Field Trip"

1. What is interesting about the title of the story?
2. What is the nature of this father-daughter relationship and how is it shown through their behavior and words? How are each seeing and experiencing their trip to Vietnam? How might we be like Kathleen?
3. What does O'Brien notice about the setting twenty years later? Does the visit to the scene of Kiowa's death meet his expectations? What is the symbolism of O'Brien's actions in the field twenty years after the incident that killed Kiowa?
4. What is interesting in the fact that after the end of the war, both O'Brien and Bowker immerse themselves in water?
5. What is interesting about the last line of the story?

"The Ghost Soldiers"

1. What role does the Morty Phillips story serve in "The Ghost Soldiers"?
2. When, where, and how does O'Brien identify or sympathize with Jorgenson?
3. In this story, O'Brien has two passages in which he describes moving out of his body. In these passages, the abstract idea of the divided self is made concrete, a concept called "reification." What is interesting about these moments, writing-wise? What purpose does this concept of reification serve for him at those moments, and for him as storyteller?
4. This story is connected to two previous ones, "Enemies" and "Friends." In what ways is the conflict between O'Brien and Jorgenson similar or different to that between Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk?
5. How could the O'Brien we see in "The Ghost Soldiers" be linked to Mary Anne Bell in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"?
6. How has Jorgenson's character developed? How has O'Brien's? How do you feel about O'Brien's actions in this story? Has your assessment of him changed? What is the tone of last lines?
7. "The Ghost Soldiers" is one of the only stories of *The Things They Carried* in which we don't know the ending in advance. Why might O'Brien want this story to be suspenseful?

"Night Life"

1. What is interesting about this story's title? How is it a pun?

2. Why do you think Rat Kiley becomes unstable? What are the aspects or incidents that affect him? How is his breakdown ironic?
3. How does O'Brien emphasize the themes of self-destruction and consumption in this story?
4. What is the role of nature and Vietnam in Rat Kiley's mental collapse?

"The Lives of the Dead"

1. What is the effect of the anecdote about the old man's corpse? What does that scene show about O'Brien? Where are there other examples in this story of the idea of looking at the dead?
2. Timmy's first love, Linda, is another emblematic character. What do you make of her? What does she represent in O'Brien's life/in the novel? What does O'Brien's 9-year-old behavior with her, and later her illness, show? What is interesting about their imagined conversation?
3. Why does O'Brien intersperse the story of Linda with anecdotes and references to the war?
4. What ideas about the role of stories and storytelling does O'Brien put forward in this piece? How is language used by soldiers and by O'Brien?
5. What is the role of dreams for O'Brien? How is the last paragraph of the book a powerful ending?
6. To what extent is this story an effective ending for the novel?

PART 3: SUMMATIVE NOVEL ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Now that you've finished analyzing the book chapter-by-chapter, respond to the following 5 questions. You should include your responses at the end of your typed chapter questions, but please create a header indicating that these are the summative novel analysis questions.

1. Why are there repeated references to Ted Lavender's, Curt Lemon's and Kiowa's deaths, even in the last story? What are the differences in the way they died and the way their stories are told? What is the purpose and effect of retelling the deaths of these three soldiers?
2. Several stories in the novel are paired, such as "Love" after "The Things They Carried," and "Ambush" after "The Man I Killed," and "Notes" after "Speaking of Courage," and let's not forget "Enemies" and "Friends." What is the purpose and effect of this narrative juxtaposition?
3. On the copyright page of the novel appears the following two sentences: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." How does this statement affect your reading of the novel, now that you have completed it?
4. O'Brien challenges us to be critical of his creation and the process of storytelling. Which of the stories that are told in this text qualify as "true war stories"? Which do not seem to qualify? According to O'Brien, how do you tell a true war story? What does he mean when he says that true war stories are never about war? What does he mean when he describes one story as, "a true story that never happened"?
5. Why do you think motivated O'Brien to write this book? In other words, what was his overall purpose in its construction? (The sections on "Notes," "Good Form," and "The Lives of the Dead" are useful places to investigate this question.)

THE END!!