

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Outline for Study: *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

Ms. Kamrass; English Ten

*My hope is that when you finish the last page of this book, or any book, there is a sense of having experienced a whole life or constellation of lives; that something has been preserved which, if the book hadn't been written, would have been lost, like most lives are. (O'Brien)*

### **Literary Terms:**

**narrative structure** – This novel is a collection of individual stories that jumps around through time from story to story, as opposed to a more linear structure. Often, even the individual stories travel back and forth. In addition, the narration changes from first-person point of view to third person depending on the story.

**paradox** – a statement, or situation, that seems contradictory, or nonsensical, on the surface, but highlights some greater truth. Images can also be “paradoxical.” Irony is inherent with paradox.

**juxtaposition** - the act or an instance of placing two or more things side by side

*Review: imagery, symbolism, repetition*

### **Pre-Reading**

- Discuss prior knowledge about Vietnam; View Vietnam video

Write some ideas and discuss the following quotes/ideas:

1. “My own experience has virtually nothing to do with the content of the book . . . My goal was to write something utterly convincing but without any rules as to what’s real and what’s made up” (O'Brien qtd in Michael's Coffey's interview “Tim O'Brien: Inventing a New Form Helps the Author Talk about War, Memory, and Storytelling”)
2. What do you carry with you when you aren't at school? Why? What do you carry with you when you are traveling? Why?

### **During Reading**

Homework will vary. For each due date you will have one or more of the following assessments: resonance commentary, reaction paper, dialectic journal, study guide questions, and quizzes. Due dates and assignments will be listed on the weekly sheets.

For each reading due date, you will prepare resonance commentary. This is a small piece of text: a sentence or paragraph or fragment. Choose something that is confusing or something that you like. Choose something that you disagree with or something you want to explore further. On the due date, these comments – and the paragraph that you write to accompany it – will guide our discussion.

### **Chapters**

1. “The Things They Carried”  
“Love”  
“Spin”

2. “On The Rainy River”  
“Enemies”  
“Friends”  
“How to Tell a True War Story”

3. “The Dentist”  
“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”  
“Stockings”  
“Church”  
4. “The Man I Killed”  
“Ambush”  
“Style”  
“Speaking of Courage”  
“Notes”

5. “In The Field”  
“Good Form”  
“Field Trip”

6. “The Ghost Soldiers”  
“Night Life”  
“The Lives of the Dead”

## Read and Analyze the Following Poem

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen  
Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind. 5

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; 10  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, 15  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; 20  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest 25  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori<sup>1</sup>.

### **Complete the following questions.**

1. Why end the poem with a Latin quote? Why not an English slogan?
2. How would the poem be different if the last stanza weren't addressed to people at home? How does this stanza change the meaning of the poem?
3. Describe and discuss the tones of the poem and where the tone shifts.
4. How would you characterize the speaker's attitude towards war?

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<sup>1</sup> It is sweet and right to die for one's country

### **Significant Characters:**

**Directions:** Write in more information as we read the novel (quotes, actions, descriptions, *what they carried...*).

**Tim O'Brien:** Narrator who is drafted into the Vietnam War and who goes through many traumatic experiences with his platoon.

**Jimmy Cross:** First lieutenant of Tim's platoon

**Ted Lavender:** The first member of Tim's platoon to be shot and killed

**Kiowa:** A Native American member of Tim's platoon whose death causes strong emotional reverberations in his friends.

**Rat Kiley:** Medic of their platoon

**Norman Bowker:** Member of Tim's platoon whose post-war actions illustrate its lasting impact

**Henry Dobbins:**

**Dave Jensen:**

**Mitchell Sanders:**

**Lee Strunk:**

**Mary Anne Bell:** A soldier's girlfriend who completes a startling transformation



### Possible Post-Reading

- Novel Study Guide
- Found Poem
- Research
- View Film
- Comparison Paragraph of film and novel.

## Dialectical Notebook\*

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English 10



This method helps you “converse” – have a dialogue – with the texts you are reading. Your responses show your unique perspective, depth of study, and engagement. In addition, you become aware of your confusion so that you may correct it with some help.

In order to complete an entry for your dialectical journals, you will take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns: **text and response**.

- Under **text**, chronologically list the important events from the section you have just completed reading. Write exact quotes – with quotation marks – for most of these examples, and include page numbers.
- Under **response**, list any question, comment, connection to your life, or connection to other texts (visual or literary). *Your entries should have a good mix of all responses.*
  - Your “response” column needs to start with common symbols. They are as follows:
    - ? question
    - > comment about the text
    - connection to your life
    - connection to other texts
    - LT for literary term (identify it too).

*Your dialectical notes should be unique: the quotes and responses should not look like anyone else’s.*

What are the advantages of keeping a dialectical notebook?

- It helps you notice relevant details that might have been overlooked.
- It helps you keep track of your thoughts while reading. Once they are written, it’s easier to use them for class discussion, writing, etc.
- This is an activity that encourages critical thinking and is something that everyone in the classroom is capable of completing.

\*This is adapted from the pre-AP strategies from the College Board Web site.

## Questions by Chapter

Directions: Answer each of the questions listed below in complete sentences. If there is more than one part to the questions, be sure to address them all. Use the questions as guideposts for reading. When graded, I'm looking for completion and correct answers. *If chapters do not have any questions, be sure to create -- and write -- at least two of your own.*

### **"The Things They Carried"**

1. What does the author illustrate in describing the different items each soldier carried?
2. I see Jimmy Cross as a Christ figure? Do you agree? Explain
3. Why does Jimmy construct an elaborate (mostly fictional) relationship with Martha? What does he get out of it?
4. How might Ted Lavender's death be his fault?
5. Why do the soldiers tell jokes about the war, about killing?
6. In the list of all the things the soldiers carried, what item was most surprising? Which item do you think says the most significant thing about the Vietnam War?

### **"Love"**

### **"Spin"**

### **"On the Rainy River"**

1. How do the opening sentences prepare you for the story: "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone"? What effect do they have on you, as a reader?
2. Why does O'Brien relate his experience as a pig declotter? How does this information contribute to the story? Why go into such specific detail?
3. What is Elroy Berdahl's role in this story? Would this be a better, or worse, story if young Tim O'Brien simply headed off to Canada by himself, without meeting another person?
4. At the story's close, O'Brien almost jumps ship to Canada, but doesn't: "I did try. It just wasn't possible" (61). What has O'Brien learned about himself, and how does he return home as a changed person?
5. Why, ultimately, does he go to war? Are there other reasons for going he doesn't list?
6. How does Elroy Berdahl help Tim to decide what to do about being drafted? Be specific.
7. In "On The Rainy River," 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 might the 43-year-old O'Brien's theory of courage be? Were you surprised when he described his entry into the Vietnam War as an act of cowardice? Do you agree that a person could enter a war as an act of cowardice?

### **"Enemies"**

### **"Friends"**

### **"How to Tell a True War Story"**

1. Why does this story begin with the line: "This is true"? How does that prepare you, as a reader, for the story? In what sense is "this" true?
2. In this story O'Brien relates a number of episodes. What makes these episodes seem true? Or, to put it another way, how does O'Brien lull you into the belief that each of these episodes is true?
3. Find a few of O'Brien's elements of a "true war story" (such as, "A true war story is never moral.") Why does O'Brien believe these elements are important to a "true" war story?
4. In what sense is a "true" war story actually true? That is, in O'Brien's terms, what is the relationship between historical truth and fictional truth? Do you agree with his assessment that fictional truth and historical do not need to be the same thing?
5. According to O'Brien, why are stories important? In your opinion, what do we, as people, need from stories--both reading them and telling them?
6. Why is the baby water buffalo scene (85) more disturbing than the death of one of O'Brien's platoon members, Dave Jensen (89, top of page)?

7. Why does Rat Kiley kill the baby water buffalo? Explain the complex emotions he experiences in this scene.
8. On page 90, O'Brien explains that this story was "not a war story. It was a love story." In what sense is this a "love story"? Why?
9. Finally, O'Brien says "none of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn't happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy..." If O'Brien is not trying to communicate historical fact, what is he trying to communicate? Why change the details? What kind of truth is he trying to relate, and why is this truth set apart from historical truth? Is it OK that this "true" war story may or may not be entirely true?
10. What advice does O'Brien offer on how to tell a war story?

#### **"The Dentist"**

#### **"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"**

1. Is this really a war story? Does it use classic war story elements? Why—or why not? Who is the main character, and why?
2. Again, this story plays with truth. In the first paragraph (101), O'Brien tells us, "I heard it from Rat Kiley, who swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I'll admit, that doesn't amount to much of a warranty." How does O'Brien engage you in a story which, up front, he's already admitted is probably not "true"? How does this relate to his ideas for a "true war story" found in an earlier story?
3. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," what transforms Mary Anne into a predatory killer? Does it matter that Mary Anne is a woman? How so? What does the story tell us about the nature of the Vietnam War?
4. How does O'Brien use physical details to show Mary Anne's change? (Think of her gestures, her clothes, her actions.) How, specifically, has she changed? And why?
5. Why do you think O'Brien keeps stopping the story so that other characters can comment on it? (i.e. page 108) How do these other conversations add to Mary Anne's story?
6. Does it matter what happened, in the end, to Mary Anne? Would this be a better story if we knew, precisely, what happened to her after she left camp? Or does this vague ending add to the story? Either way, why?
7. The story Rat tells in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is highly fantastical. Does its lack of believability make it any less compelling? Do you believe it? Does it fit O'Brien's criteria for a true war story?

#### **"Stockings"**

#### **"Church"**

#### **"The Man I Killed"**

#### **"Ambush"**

#### **"Style"**

#### **"Speaking of Courage"**

1. To begin with, why is this story called "Speaking of Courage"? Assume the title does NOT hold any irony. In what sense does this story speak of courage?
2. Why does Norman Bowker still feel inadequate with seven metals? And why is Norman's father such a presence in his mental life? Would it really change Norman's life if he had eight metals, the silver star, etc.?
3. What is the more difficult problem for Norman--the lack of the Silver Star or the death of Kiowa? Which does he consider more and why?
4. Like other male characters in this novel (for example, Tim O'Brien and Lt. Jimmy Cross), Norman Bowker develops an active fantasy life. Why do these men develop these fantasy roles? What do they get from telling these fantasy stories to themselves?
5. Why is Norman unable to relate to anyone at home? More importantly, why doesn't he even try?
6. Aside from "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage" is the only other story written in third person. Why are these stories set apart in this manner? What does the author achieve by doing so?

7. How is Kiowa's death a climax in the series of stories? He is a prominent character in the company's narrative, a soft-spoken, peaceful man—how does his death change their relationships?
8. This story illustrates an irony of communication—while O'Brien writes his stories to explain the horrors of his war experience and to create connection, they also distance him from them [since he is so changed due to his experiences. Describe this irony.

#### **"Notes"**

#### **"In the Field"**

#### **"Good Form"**

#### **"Field Trip"**

#### **"The Ghost Soldiers"**

1. How do you feel about O'Brien's actions in "The Ghost Soldiers"?
2. "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 particularly suspenseful?
3. After reading this story, reflect as to whether the fear O'Brien feels is more acute than the actual pain of being physically hurt. Is it? Be specific in your description.
4. How does "The Ghost Soldiers" demonstrate the tension between a soldier's need for camaraderie and the difficulty of finding it? When does O'Brien feel alienated—and why?
5. How does the story show O'Brien's progression? For example, in "On the Rainy River," he was an innocent young man. Yet this story reflects upon how he has been changed by the war. Explain this idea fully.

#### **"Night Life"**

#### **"The Lives of the Dead"**

1. Reread the first paragraph of "The Lives of the Dead." How does O'Brien set us up to believe this story? What techniques does he use to convince us this story is "true"? In general, how are details used in this collection of stories in such a way their truth is hard to deny?
2. In your opinion, why does O'Brien choose to include this story about a young girl, named Linda, in this collection? What does it accomplish?
3. In many ways, this book is as much about stories, or the necessity of stories, as it is about the Vietnam War. According to O'Brien, what do stories accomplish? Why does he continue to tell stories about the Vietnam War, about Linda?
4. Reread the final two pages of this book. Consider what the young Tim O'Brien learns about storytelling from his experience with Linda. How does this knowledge prepare him not only for the war, but also to become a writer? Within the parameters of this story, how would you characterize Tim O'Brien's understanding of the purpose of fiction? How does fiction relate to life, that is, life in the journalistic or historic sense?
5. Would it change how you read this story, or this novel, if Linda never existed? Why or why not?
6. Assume for a moment, that the writer, Tim O'Brien, created a fictional main character, also called Tim O'Brien, to inhabit this novel. Why would the real Tim O'Brien do that? What would that accomplish in this novel? How would that strengthen a book about "truth"?
7. Finally, if O'Brien is trying to relate some essential details about emotional life--again, as opposed to historic life--is he successful in doing that? Is he justified in tinkering with the facts to get at (what he would term) some larger, story-truth?