

*Essay: The Things They Carried*

*The purpose of this essay is to analyze and discuss O'Brien's story. You do not need to do any research for this; rely on your own interpretation.*

*The narrator provides detailed lists of what the men carried. Discuss the pattern or progression in these lists, and the significance of this method of telling the story.*

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien appears to be a simple story about items a platoon of soldiers carried while in Vietnam. The story actually centers around the death of one of the platoon members and the horrible conditions of Vietnam. This topic is a very difficult one to talk about and the story is written as if the narrator is working up the courage to talk about it. The list of things they carried are a way for the narrator to describe the Vietnam experience but they also focus and prepare the narrator to discuss the more emotional issues.

The story begins with the narrator discussing items that were carried that are everyday life things. These items are all the items that make life in Vietnam more bearable. The first list includes items like chewing gum, cigarettes, Kool-Aid, and lighters. Henry Dobson carries canned peaches and poundcake and Dave Jensen carries extra hygiene supplies. The narrator also discusses Lt. Cross' obsession with a girl named Martha and the letters of hers that he carries. Most of the items in this list are non-military and are easily discussed without bringing up any difficult emotional issues. Ted Lavender, the soldier who dies, is mentioned briefly. It says he was scared so he carried tranquilizers and that he was shot in the head in mid-April. This is the real emotional point of the story but in this list it is barely mentioned. Lavender's death is briefly referred to again at the end of the list in terms of how his body was wrapped in a rain poncho that all the men carried. The narrator gets a little braver and mentions that he was shot, wrapped in a poncho, carried across a paddy, and put on a chopper and flown away.

Almost as if the narrator regrets talking about the death of Lavender, he goes back to easier things to talk about in the next list. He begins by explaining more of Lt. Cross' obsession with Martha. After explaining more of Cross' fantasies, the narrator starts listing items that are more military than the first list. This list includes weapons of various types and how much they weigh. It is a very non-emotional list for the most part and it seems to bring down the emotional level of the narrator. This seems to trigger the narrator's emotions again and he explains in more detail what happened after Lavender was shot. All of a sudden there is no more list. The narrator talks about how several soldiers feel about the death. This includes Lt. Cross' thoughts that Lavender is dead because he couldn't stop thinking about Martha. This is the most emotional and detailed account so far in the story.

Once again, the narrator goes back to the lists as if to focus himself but now even the lists seem to be more emotional. The weapons are now described as "a means of killing or staying alive." The list is brief and the narrator goes more quickly into a discussion of Lt. Cross' obsession with Martha, the good luck pebble she gave him, and the fantasies he has about her keep taking his mind away from the war.

The next list refers to things they carried according to the type of mission. It still refers to gear and weapons but the narrator now includes more details about situations and conditions of the war. The list is then forgotten and the events of Lavender's death are finally told in great length. The narrator has worked himself up to the point where he can talk about the entire event without going back to the lists before getting the whole story out. He goes into great detail about Lt. Cross' fantasies and it is disturbing to hear about how he really wasn't present mentally at a very dangerous time. We had heard earlier that he was preoccupied but it was not clear why Lt. Cross felt responsible for Lavender's death.

The narrator has finally talked about the difficult topic and he begins another list to relieve himself again. This list begins very simple and without a lot of details. It turns negative very quickly. His list, now about things they carried is depressing, stressful, and definitely not positive. He talks about things like mindless marching, carrying out terrible missions without caring, and burning villages. He talks about things like mindless marching, carrying out terrible missions without caring, and burning villages. He talks about how Lt. Cross grieved and how other members of the platoon were thinking about Lavender's death. It appears that the narrator can no longer use a list to distract himself from the horrible things that went on in Vietnam. The emotions have been let loose and there is no going back.

For the remainder of the story, the lists are definitely not the focus. The narrator still mentions things that are carried but they are rarely actual objects. Most are thoughts, feelings, or attitudes the men carried in the war. He says, "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love longing-." The narrator has successfully worked up to the deeply emotional issues and no longer uses the lists to relieve his discomfort. He talks freely about these internal things that the men carried.

The lists in this story do more than educate about life in the Vietnam War. They help the narrator to tell a traumatic story a little easier. The lists enable him to organize his thoughts and ease into a difficult emotional topic. If the narrator let too much out too soon he would retreat back to the lists to ground himself before continuing. As the story progresses, the size of the lists dwindle but the powerful emotional content grows as the narrator gets more courage to talk about the horrors that occurred.