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The Things They Carried

In “The Things They Carried”, Tim O’Brien uses images of a war setting to create powerful stories of war and explain soldier’s conflicting emotions during and after the war. The book is a collection of mini-stories about the Vietnam War and especially focuses on some soldier’s perspectives. Some literary devices that are used in the book are imagery, allegory, symbolism, intense setting and allusions. These help create a strong narrative that completely engulfs the reader. The literary devices are used vividly, helping to recreate the reality of war for readers. Although O’Brien uses real names of soldiers, the authenticity of stories cannot be confirmed but most people consider the work to be nonfiction as there is likely truth to the matter, considering O’Brien is a veteran himself.

Imagery and symbolism are used extensively in the book. For instance, in “Speaking of Courage”, Norman Bowker keeps driving around a lake where Kiowa died. This is a powerful way of telling the reader that what Kiowa represented to his comrades. Kiowa was a genuinely decent human being and the symbolism of American decency. Although he was a Native American, he espoused true modern American values such as honor and courage. When Kiowa dies, his comrades feel a tacit disappointment, especially Norman Bowker. Bowker keeps on driving around the lake, but he unable to talk about the matter because that would mean accepting the truth: decency died in the war. If the soldiers accepted that simple fact, then they would inevitably have been demoralized. Another powerful example is found in “In the Field”, in which soldiers’ guilt is brought to the fore. The story makes it clear that every soldier experiences guilt, related to one thing or another. O’Brien address this guilt with the following line in the story: ‘“The truth,” Norman Bowker would've said, “is I let the guy go.”’ (Speaking of Courage, 127). All of the soldiers feel that American decency was a casualty of the war as well and the blame for this can be considered universal, as everyone collectively let this happen, either through active or passive action. However, O’Brien does emphasize that this does not absolve people of their individual responsibility.

The theme of decency and war responsibility is also evident in other parts of the book such as in “On the River” where O’Brien writes, *“The only certainty that summer was moral confusion. It was my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why.”* (On the Rainy River, 38). This is a powerful statement as the soldiers fighting held this belief that the war could have been avoided, or at the very least, the scale of the war could have been reduced. Symbolism comes into play in “Field Trip” when an older O’Brien takes his daughter, Kathleen back to Vietnam. The symbolism is very strong here since it is a fact that at the time of writing, O’Brien didn’t have a daughter and he hadn’t gone back to Vietnam. Kathleen depicts the young America and its young generations that do not remember the war and most certainly do not understand its realities. The purpose of bringing Kathleen back to Vietnam was to show her, and by extension to young Americans, that the war was very different than the glorious way it was depicted in some media. There was no glorious triumph and the soldiers felt that the purpose of that particular war wasn’t very pure or decent. Another reason for this part is that O’Brien wanted young Americans to understand that the soldiers didn’t just sacrifice their lives in the war, but the main casualty was human morality and decency. An example of the guilt O’Brien feels is depicted by the following line, “There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.” (The Things They Carried, 180). O’Brien is talking about the hundreds of thousands of dead Vietnamese, killed by the war and not even afforded roper burials.

Another instance of powerful symbolism is depicted by O’Brien when he explains that he worked at a meatpacking plant the year before being drafted into the army. He goes on to explain that he fled to Canada to avoid being drafted and sent away to war. However, none of this actually happened; rather, this depicts his emotional and mental state. O’Brien is confessing that he did not want to go to war and he was very close to running away. He was sitting on the fence with the decision to go to war or flee the country to avoid the former outcome. He explains that this decision consumes him as he is always engrossed in these thoughts. However, at the end, he decided not to run away and joins the army to go to Vietnam.

The setting itself is an extremely powerful tool to get O’Brien’s message across. The book is set in Vietnam where the war takes place. The Vietnam War was a Cold War conflict that was in actuality a civil war but America took the side of the groups that favored a democratic country with a free market economy. Hence, the second longest war in American history took place and this is the setting of the book. One of the key features of the Vietnam War was that it was very unreliable and politically confusing. It wasn’t just a North and South Vietnam conflict; certain groups from each side supported the other side as well, complicating the whole affair to the degree of obscureness. The case in point is the Viet Cong, a Southern guerilla outfit, supporting the North Vietnamese by assisting the Northern Vietnamese Army. This only serves to complicate things as O’Brien is serving in Quang Ngai, a stronghold of the Viet Cong. This setting further drives home the point of the story about morality and conflicting emotions of soldiers. They are confused as to who the enemy is and who is an ally. They question themselves about the possibility of traitorous elements within their alliance as they can’t even trust the groups they are fighting beside.

Moreover, the American entry into Vietnam War itself is covered in vagueness. The reasons of American involvement are unclear and confusing. This is not only a political problem, but a real threat to the soldiers on ground. The soldiers keep thinking that any group of people could turn on them, thinking that they are the enemy, whereas the American soldiers were led to believe they were fighting for the freedom of the Vietnamese people. The fact that the people the American soldiers are fighting to protect might turn on them at any moment, disturbs O’Brien and his fellow soldiers. It leads them to question the motive and purpose of the war. This again depicts the conflicting emotions of soldiers as they have mixed feelings about serving their country, and being disgusted by the whole premise of the war. The jungle setting furthers this point as jungles are unreliable and confusing. Enemies can appear anywhere in the jungle as creatures kill each other just to survive. The Vietnam War was also like a jungle, because enemies could be anywhere and soldiers could be attacked at any minute even by Vietnamese civilians. The jungle itself serves as a character in the story as it portrays the whole nature and notion of the war as unreliable and perplexing.

The contrast in the jungle setting is made with depictions of places in America like small towns. This is referenced several times in the book as names like Dairy Queen and A&M are mentioned along with the references of movie theaters. This actually depicts the constant feature of American life as opposed to the situation in Vietnam. The complete unreliability of Vietnam is in stark contrast to the normal life in America’s small towns which are characterized by their constant nature and completely average character. This also strengthens O’Brien’s belief that the American youth can never understand what truly happened in Vietnam. The major reason for their obliviousness is the fact that Vietnam at the time of war and America are completely different so it does not come as a surprise to O’Brien that they do not understand the horror of the Vietnamese jungles.

The language used in the book is not consistent as O’Brien alternates between tones with some parts being truly conversational and others being grandiose. An example of this can be observed with the quote in the book, “They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.” (The Things They Carried, 39). This style is imposing as the list keeps on building to the point that the soldiers’ mission seems extremely important. The conversational tone can also be observed in an exchange in the book:

*“Henry Dobbins thought about it.*

*Yeah, well, he finally said. I don't see no moral.*

*There it is, man.”* (The Things They Carried, 35-38)

“The Things They Carried” is a powerful story that presents an unorthodox view of the war at the time it was published. It helped Americans understand the reality of the war and what it meant for the young people drafted into the army against their will. It depicts how different the perceptions of people can be as some Vietnamese perceived the Americans as liberators and others thought of them as oppressors who were interfering in their affairs. It also shows the contrast between the ideas of war in the minds of people back home in America and the soldiers who were on the battlefield. O’Brien uses powerful tools such as imagery, symbolism and use of different tones in the book along with intense settings that drive home his points regarding the war.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990. Internet resource.