

ENGL 110: Study Questions—*The Things They Carried*

“The Things They Carried”

1. Why do you think O’Brien begins the first story with Martha? What is she like, what does she represent for Jimmy Cross? Why is he so concerned about whether or not she’s a virgin? You might also discuss why the film they go see is *Bonnie and Clyde* and what is meant by Jimmy’s strange, tender/violent fantasy of touching Martha’s knee all night.
2. Much of this story is told using lists, complete with military acronyms and specific weights. What effect do the lists have on the reader? How does O’Brien keep these lists from being boring, like we might expect lists to be?
3. Discuss how we find out what happened to Lavender. When is he first mentioned? How much information do we find out here? What do we find out later? Why do you think Lavender’s death is told about in this way?
4. Talk about this line, on p. 11: “Imagination was a killer.” Specifically, what’s being referred to here? How else in the story is imagination dangerous? You might discuss, particularly, why Jimmy Cross blames himself for Lavender’s death. Do you think O’Brien wants readers to believe that Cross is to blame?
5. Talk about what the narrator says about “poses” on p. 20: “There were numerous such poses.” The soldiers are also described as actors in the middle of the page? Why?
6. Talk about the theme of shame in the story and O’Brien’s theory of why men fight (21).
7. Discuss the image of “freedom birds” on p. 22. How does this image work in the story? What’s it contrasted to? (Think about the motif of lightness vs. heaviness, for instance).

“On the Rainy River”

1. Discuss why O’Brien has never told this story before. What do you think are the implications of the narrator calling the story a “confession” in the opening paragraph?
2. How does O’Brien tell us that he originally thought about courage back in the summer of 1968, before he went to the war? What specific metaphor does he use to describe courage? What’s wrong with this definition? Does he seem to alter it elsewhere in the story or book?
3. What do you think is the significance of the work he does at the Armour meat-packing plant that summer? You might want to look very specifically at the long paragraph on p. 46 that begins “Most of this I’ve told before...” What’s going on here?
4. What do you think about Elroy Berdahl and the Tip Top Lodge? What’s significant about this place? What function in the story does Elroy serve? You might look specifically at how Elroy is described when O’Brien first meets him—how he looks and what he holds in his hand. What’s going on here?
5. Discuss the vision that the O’Brien narrator experiences when Berdahl takes him out on the river. What does O’Brien see on the other side? What’s unusual about this scene, and why is it significant in the story?
6. Talk about the way the story ends. Does the O’Brien narrator make a decision or not? How does the end tie back to the beginning?

“How to Tell a True War story”

1. Why do you think the story begins with the very short, simple sentence: “This is true”? Is the story true? If not, why does he begin it this way? What do you think the narrator means by “true” here?
2. Look at the letter Rat Kiley writes to Curt Lemon’s sister. Why do you think O’Brien opens the story with this incident? How do you think Curt’s sister might have reacted to this letter? How are readers meant to react to it?
3. Talk a little bit about the story Mitchell Sanders tells O’Brien—the story within a story. What is this story about? What do you think is the point of including this story?
4. Discuss Rat’s shooting of the baby water buffalo. On p. 78, the narrator introduces this story with the words, “here’s what actually happened.” But is it? Why do you think O’Brien chooses to tell this particular story, with these particular details? What does it accomplish?
5. Look at how the story ends (pp. 84-85). Why does O’Brien conclude with the “older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics” (84)? What does he *mean* when he says, “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (85)?
6. Comment on the final paragraph of the story, when O’Brien writes that “a true war story is never about war” (85). What do you think he means by this?

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

1. The story begins with a sentence that mentions the “border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane,” and in many ways it seems to be a story about border or boundary crossing. What kinds of borders are crossed in the story, by Mary Anne or others? Discuss as many as you can think of.
2. How does the notion of bringing a woman to Vietnam first come up? (Look at pp. 92-93). What is the men’s view of Asian women? Does Mary Anne fit this stereotype? How is she described when she first arrives in Vietnam?
3. Talk about how Mary Anne changes during her time in country. How do her dreams and plans for the future change as well?
4. What are we to make of the strange scene when Mark Fossie finds Mary Anne in the tent with the Greenies? Why is she wearing a necklace of human tongues? Do you think there is specific symbolic significance associated with this? What about the statements she makes on p. 111 about wanting to “eat” Vietnam, to ingest it and have it inside of her?
5. What does this line mean at the very end of the story: “She had crossed to the other side”?