

**Living the Nightlife: Teaching The Vietnam War Through Tim O'Brien's
*The Things They Carried***

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I do feel that Vietnam . . . is still the single prevailing fact of American life. All our present anguish comes in the wake of the Vietnam War; it is the accumulation of the Vietnam War.

—Michael Herr, *Vietnam, We've All Been There*

INTRODUCTION

An image from the waning days of the Vietnam war: on the tiny black and white television in the kitchen, footage of U.S. soldiers emerging from the jungle with rifles and machine guns, bandoleers slung across their shoulders, packs of cigarettes tucked in the bands of their helmets.

Growing up in the early 1970s in Norfolk, Virginia, home to the second largest naval base in the country, the war was all around me. People wore silver bracelets with the names of soldiers missing in action stamped on them, and the flag at the MacArthur Memorial often flew at half-mast, and I remember the day one of my second grade classmates left school early when his older brother went from missing to killed in action.

Living in Virginia, home to so much history, had a profound impact on my own burgeoning interest in history. Going to Appomattox and Richmond stirred my interest in the Civil War as profoundly as the trips to Yorktown and Williamsburg made Colonial history come alive. Though many people know Plymouth Rock and 1620, all Virginians are highly aware (and sensitive) to the fact that the first permanent English settlement was established 13 years prior to this at Jamestown, and frequent visits to this sight sparked my interest in pre-Colonial history.

By junior high school, two books on my parents' bookshelves rekindled my interest in the Vietnam War, by then only dimly remembered as something that I once watched on television. James Michener's *Kent State*, and especially Peter Davies' *The Truth About Kent State*, helped give me a tentative grasp on the anti-war movement in the U.S. and the violence that erupted on May 4, 1970 on the campus of Kent State University. (No, I was not a precocious child reading Michener at age 13; I mainly looked at the pictures, and it was in Davies' book that I first saw the horrifying photograph of a young girl kneeling in the blood flowing from Jeffrey Miller's head as he lay dead from a National Guardsman's bullet at Kent State.)

These early (and interactive) experiences with history are not available to my students. My students are not readers. Reading, if done at all, is a chore done in school, in English class, and has no bearing on the “real” world, let alone their lives. Because of this situation, I need books that appeal to reluctant readers without alienating the skilled (but uninterested) readers I have in class, and to this end I have chosen Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* as the focal point of my curriculum unit on the Vietnam War through literature.

UNIT BACKGROUND

My curriculum unit is designed for the students in my English 3 (American Literature) class, but could be easily adapted to any high school English or social studies class, and could even be used at the junior high level, as more and more teachers across the country are teaching stories from *The Things They Carried* in the 8th grade. Currently, my school uses the accelerated block schedule, meaning that I see my students every day for 90 minutes.

Out of the 20 students currently in my English 3 class, none are native-English speakers. Based on a reading interest survey conducted in August 2002, only four of these 20 consider themselves readers—someone who reads both in and out of school and has access to books either at home or at the library. (In December, I asked these students if any of them were given books for Christmas presents; not one student said he/she had been in a bookstore in 2002, and many of them, all between the ages of 16-19, admitted that they had never been in a bookstore or purchased a book.)

My students are “at-risk:” at-risk of dropping out, at risk of getting pregnant and not finishing school; few go on to college, and many of them are the first people in their families to attend high school. Many of my students work in order to help with the bills at home or to earn money to send to relatives in their native countries. One in three lives with a single (usually female) parent who is supporting two or three children, often on an unskilled laborer’s salary.

Obviously, reading outside of school is not a high priority for these students, nor is reading modeled to these students at home as even a simple (and inexpensive) form of entertainment. If I am to hook these students on reading while simultaneously attempting to teach them reading skills **and** get them to see how reading relates to their world, I need a book such as *The Things They Carried* that is a “high-low” book, meaning that the book has a high interest level while being at a reading level that will not be too challenging to my students, none of whom read at grade-level.

Published in 1990 and hailed as one of the best books of that year by *The New York Times*, *The Things They Carried*, subtitled *A Work of Fiction*, is a series of 22 interlocking stories that tell the story of a fictional company of U.S. soldiers (“grunts”) fighting in Vietnam in 1969. Through the course of the book, the reader comes to know

Platoon leader Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and the other grunts: Kiowa, Dave Jensen, Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender, Norman Bowker, and a soldier named Tim O'Brien.

The character named Tim O'Brien provides an interesting structure to the discussions we will have about the book: how much of Tim O'Brien the actual person is "in" Tim O'Brien the character? Close reading of three stories – "The Man I Killed," "Good Form," and "Ambush," will allow for a deep, meaningful discussion of this aspect of the book, and will also lead my students to one of the themes of the book: this idea of moral responsibility for our actions, even in war, and just what constitutes moral behavior in war? The latter question just may prove the most interesting for the students, as this question, posed to them during the war with Iraq, caused a lively debate in the classroom.

Thus what I am seeking to teach with this unit has three components: one being that my students begin to understand the roots of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. This will require that they understand the U.S.'s long-standing policy of fighting communism in any country throughout the world, and my students must therefore understand that this meant that the U.S. government was willing to commit U.S. troops and sacrifice American lives in order to protect and support democracy.

In addition to this, the students must understand some (if not all) of the factors that led James T. Patterson to write in *Grand Expectations* that "this was the longest and ultimately most unpopular war in United States history" (Patterson 597). The class must understand the importance of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution but also address the issue of why the U.S. never declared war on Vietnam and how this had devastating effects on both U.S. troops and the American people, especially as the war dragged on.

The second component of the unit deals with the skills that are at the heart of my teaching in any of my English classes. My students must be able to analyze the author's tone, and are expected to discuss themes in a work of literature, and explain how the author uses stylistic devices such as repetition, imagery, and metaphor to convey meaning. Thus, I must never lose sight of the fact that this is an English class.

However, I face the same problem that Larry R. Johannessen mentions in *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*: "Students' lack of knowledge about the war presents a difficult problem for teachers who want to teach the literature and film of the Vietnam War: how to begin?" (Johannessen 29). One way to manage this problem is to keep the literature at the heart of the unit, allowing issues raised by careful reading of *The Things They Carried* to be the driving force throughout.

An additional problem, briefly mentioned earlier, is the fact that my students do not read well, and are consequently bored easily when required to read for an extended length of time, a problem I experienced just a few weeks ago as this class struggled through *The Great Gatsby*. Because these students lack fluency as readers, they as a whole focus on plot elements, rarely going below the surface and analyzing the literary elements used by

the author and how these elements convey meaning. With *Gatsby*, my students struggled with the formal diction and complex syntax, and had difficulty understanding Fitzgerald's use of symbolism and metaphor. However, all of the students grasped the basic plot elements, and understood the hard lesson that *Gatsby* never learned: rich girls do not marry poor boys.

This lack of fluency should not be a problem with *The Things They Carried*, and when I began the planning stages of this unit last spring, I gave this issue much thought as I re-read the book, paying close attention to issues of diction, syntax and readability. I asked myself: will my students be able to understand the deeper issues raised by this book? This is crucial to the unit because, as this is designed for an English 3 class, the students will be required to analyze and discuss O'Brien's use of literary devices such as repetition, simile and metaphor, foreshadowing and symbolism, as well as the structure of the text itself, in order to gain a deeper understanding of both the book and the psychological effects of the war on the men who fought it.

THE BOOK ITSELF

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . we live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

—Joan Didion, *The White Album*

Published in 1990, *The Things They Carried* is the third in a series of books by Tim O'Brien that focuses on the Vietnam War (the others are 1973's memoir *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, and 1978's *Going After Cacciato*, Vietnam is a part of 1994's *In The Lake Of The Woods*, but the book is not exclusively about the war.) On the surface, the 22 interlocking stories recount the history of a platoon fighting, living, and dying in the Quang Ngai province of Vietnam in 1969. Because Tim O'Brien the author was an infantryman, a groundpounder, a grunt, in 1969, it is easy to assume that the narrative voice in these stories is that of the author; making this assumption is both natural and false. Adding to this confusion between author and narrator is the fact that a character named "Tim O'Brien" is the narrator. This metafictional element will be confusing to my students. However, in the poetry unit taught in this class prior to beginning *Things*, I focused much of our in-class discussions on the distinction between poet and speaker in poetry, and I will remind the students of this before we begin the book. (A brief discussion of the book's metafictional aspects is included later in the unit.)

Having "Tim O'Brien" as a character brings up one of the main themes of the book, that being the idea of moral responsibility not just in war, but also in life. In an interview published in Eric Schroeder's *Vietnam: We've All Been There*, O'Brien says in the context of a discussion of *Going After Cacciato* that one of his goals in writing *Cacciato* was to "have readers care about what's right and wrong and about the difficulty of saying no to a war," (Schroeder 137).

Saying no to a war is the central idea of the story “On the Rainy River.” This is story number four in the book, and forms, along with the title story, an early cornerstone in the narrative, important because it gives the reader information about Tim O’Brien, the narrator and character, before he goes to Vietnam. In 20 pages, “On The Rainy River” tells the story of “Tim O’Brien’s” decision not to cross the Rainy River that separates Minnesota (the character’s home state) from Canada, and avoid the draft and the war: “I couldn’t make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life” (O’Brien 44).

This story will serve as an early focal point for discussion in the unit, bringing up as it does questions of courage and moral responsibility, both to one’s self and to one’s country. “On The Rainy River” gives the reader an agonizingly intimate portrait of the ethical struggle faced by many young men in America during the Vietnam War: being scared to fight but also scared of the potential ostracism of running away. The story concludes with “Tim O’Brien” saying, “I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war” (O’Brien 61).

The conclusion of the story provides an excellent starting point for whole-class discussion of what responsibility, if any, a person has to fight a war supported by one’s government, but one to which that person is morally opposed. Is killing another human being in the name of democracy “better” than killing a person in the name of communism? These questions should lead to good discussions, especially in light of the U.S.’s current (2002-03) war with Iraq.

Yet none of “On The Rainy River” is true. In a lecture given by the author on April 21, 1999, O’Brien says, “. . . none of it’s true. Or very little of it. It’s invented . . . I’ve never been to the Rainy River in my life. I haven’t been within 200 miles of the place. But, although the story is invented, it’s still true, which is what fiction is all about” (O’Brien, *Writing Vietnam*).

This idea of what is true, and the seeming paradox in what “Tim O’Brien” the narrator describes as the fact that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth” (O’Brien 179) is another theme/major issue for the reader to grapple with in *The Things They Carried*. This idea of story-truth and happening truth will be another driving force in the class’s reading of the book, and while this is not the only theme of the book, it is in many ways the most important. Therefore, I (we) will spend much time as a class discussing this issue and how it relates to the text, using O’Brien’s statement in *Vietnam: We’ve All Been There*, “you tell lies to get at the truth” (Schroeder 132) as a discussion-opener.

Three more stories, “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Good Form,” comprise the heart of the book and the unit, as each one helps reiterate the central theme of the mutability of truth in a work of fiction.

Each of these stories revolves around the “slim, dead, almost dainty” (O’Brien 124) young man killed by the narrator. “The Man I Killed” will also be used to reinforce my students’ abilities to recognize and discuss literary elements such as imagery and repetition, and be able to discuss how these elements convey meaning to the reader. “Ambush” and “Good Form” will be used to continue the discussion started by a close reading of “On The Rainy River,” i.e., the story-truth vs. happening truth debate. “Ambush” and “Good Form” will also be used to analyze the guilt that comes with killing another human being in war, and how this killing is explained to the soldier’s family.

Narrator O’Brien leaves this matter in the minds of the reader. “Good Form” concludes with a conversation between the narrator and Kathleen, his nine-year-old daughter: “‘Daddy, tell the truth,’ Kathleen can say, ‘did you ever kill anybody?’ And I can say, honestly, ‘Of course not.’ Or I can say honestly, ‘Yes’” (O’Brien 180).

This exchange should begin an in-depth discussion of the truth theme. (How this discussion will be managed, through the use of the “Inside-Outside” strategy, will be more thoroughly described in the lesson plans section of the final unit.) As a final component of the in-class discussion of these stories, and as a way to prepare the students for the essay section of the test for the unit, I will ask the students to discuss a comment made by the character Tim O’Brien in “How To Tell A True War Story.” “A true war story is never moral” (O’Brien 68) as it relates to “The Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Good Form.”

Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*

According to William Gass, metafiction is “somehow about fiction itself” (Currie 24). Because “Tim O’Brien” is both a character in the book and the narrator, *The Things They Carried* can be considered metafiction, and it is therefore important to explain to students, prior to beginning the book, what metafiction is, and why authors use this technique. In an interview, O’Brien states that he uses metafiction to make the stories “more real” (Sawyer 117-126), and the use of metafiction does make the events and stories as real as possible for the reader.

In addition to this aspect of added realism, using “Tim O’Brien” as a character/narrator also helps establish one of the book’s central themes: the differences between “story-truth” and “happening-truth,” and how “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth” (O’Brien 179).

Because the nature of truth is central to many of the stories, and because the narrator at times tells the reader that a particular event is, in fact, not true even as he tells it, students must understand that Tim O’Brien, the author, Vietnam veteran, and father, is

not the character in the book, and the voice in these stories is not that of Tim O'Brien, the person.

A good way to help students avoid confusion on this issue is to have them look at the book's title page, which includes the line "a work of fiction" below the title. As many of my students are inexperienced both with reading and with books themselves, this becomes a quick and illuminating way to examine the text itself and remind students that fiction, however closely based on actual events, is not truth.

Of the twenty-two stories that comprise *The Things They Carried*, seven of them use metafictional elements to varying degrees. "Notes," "Good Form," "Field Trip," and "The Lives of the Dead," are almost exclusively metafictional, and are some of the most powerful stories in the book. When reading these, it is important that the students understand that the use of metafiction allows the author a degree of intimacy with the reader not found in more traditional third-person narratives. In these stories and in "The Man I Killed," the layers between author and narrator are stripped away and then mixed together in such a way that the traditional barrier between reader and narrator is virtually non-existent. By removing this barrier, "Notes" and "Good Form" read like personal letters to the reader from the narrator; letters about guilt and complicity, how the difference between right and wrong is blurred during war, and about the nature of truth itself.

The effect is both emotionally powerful and unique, and it is therefore necessary to discuss these metafictional aspects as they arise while reading the book. A good question for the teacher to pose to the class is, "How would these stories be different without the metafictional elements?"

IMPLEMENTATION

Because I have had this English 3 class all year, I had an opportunity last semester for a kind of "trial run" for the book. I read "The Man I Killed" out loud, and had the students list and discuss examples of imagery from the story, discuss the author's use of repetition, and how this "worked" in the story. As expected, the students were interested in the story due to the subject matter (death! killing people!), and had no trouble with the language, as this story (and the entire book) is written in a straightforward, easily understood style. Pleased with the results of this "experiment," I knew then that I had managed to find a way around the lack-of-fluency hurdle.

As previously mentioned, the fact that my students are easily bored when required to read also plays an important factor in the time-frame component of the unit, and so I have allotted 25-30 days for this unit. *The Things They Carried* is 246 pages long; at this pace, students will be required to read approximately 10 pages per day, and I have no doubt that my students will have no trouble reading this much per day.

As another way to combat boredom, this unit will incorporate poetry and film. Students will read Denise Levertov's "What Were They Like," and various poems by Yusef Komunyakaa, Wendy Wilder Larsen and Tran Thi Nga, and Vietnam veteran Bruce Weigl, as a way to see the war from different perspectives: those of someone against the war (Levertov), a soldier who had orders to kill (Weigl), and from the Vietnamese people (Komunyakaa and Nga). (Poetry is discussed in its own section later in the unit.)

Seeing the war through the eyes of the Vietnamese is the third component of why I am teaching this unit. Some of my English 3 students have experienced war in their native countries, and having them read poetry that expresses the true devastation that war brings will, ultimately, facilitate a better understanding of both *The Things They Carried* and the Vietnam War itself.

My final implementation strategy is adapted from a teaching tool described in Johannessen's *Illumination Rounds*. This activity calls for the students to be divided into "squads" of four, and then having the squads navigate the "booby trapped" classroom while carrying a heavy and unwieldy board (Johannessen 35-37). This kinesthetic activity should intrigue and engage even the most reluctant reader.

As a pre-reading activity to be used on the day the class begins reading *The Things They Carried*, each student will pull a single object from his/her purse or wallet and talk briefly about the significance of the chosen object. This not only gets the students thinking about the things they carry, but also helps foster a positive classroom climate. Immediately following this activity, the reading of the book should begin.

Films

In addition to using poetry as a relatively quick way to get my students to see the war through the "enemy's" eyes, there are also some films that will help facilitate the learning process and serve as a visual companion to the readings. As every teacher knows, students enjoy watching films, and these visuals will also help the struggling readers in the class.

Based on the true story of Armed Forces Radio disc jockey Adrian Cronauer, Barry Levinson's *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) stars Robin Williams as Cronauer. The last 30 minutes of the film will be shown in class, as these scenes effectively convey the dangers of being a soldier or civilian in Saigon during the war. This portion of the film will also show the students one of the most frustrating and devastating aspects of the war: U.S. soldiers never knew what form the enemy would take. Was the pretty girl selling flowers on the street a member of the Viet Cong? Or was the "friendly" bartender serving American G.I.s also gathering intelligence to report back to the "enemy?" This film will help the students understand the "other" side of the war, and will hopefully fuel

in-class discussions on the kind of tension created by living in a situation where you never knew who your friends and enemies truly were.

Excerpts from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), will also be shown as a way for students to see the true horror and confusion of the war, and, in the case of *Apocalypse Now*, the sheer insanity of the war and (again) the toll the stress takes on the men involved. **A word of warning:** all three of these movies contain profanity and violence; therefore, each movie should be screened by the teacher before being shown in class.

Poetry

Poetry is a big part of my teaching, and I will use any excuse to get my students reading poetry and writing their own! For the purposes of this unit, poetry will be used for many reasons, not the least of which being to alleviate some of the tedium that inevitably sets in while reading an extended narrative over the course of many days. The poems I have chosen for this unit also serve a deeper purpose, and that is to have the students see the Vietnam War from different perspectives.

Because my students are familiar with poetry and the stylistic devices used by poets (imagery, symbolism, metaphor, simile, repetition, etc.), instructional time will be spent on close readings of the poems in the unit. Students will be required to identify and analyze the speaker in each poem and, more importantly, discuss the different perspectives on the war expressed in each poem. Students will be required to analyze how the voice in each poem contrasts with the voice in *The Things They Carried*, and discuss how the use of poetic devices conveys meaning to the reader.

As a journal entry, students will analyze "What Were They Like?" for theme(s), and discuss how the perspective (i.e. voice), is both different from and similar to the voice in *The Things They Carried*. After reading "What Were They Like?" and "Deciding," students will discuss how these two poems affect the reader – do these poems create sympathy for the Vietnamese? What other emotional responses do these poems evoke?

Like Tim O'Brien, both Bruce Weigl and Yusef Komunyakaa are Vietnam veterans. While reading their poetry, students will discuss how the war experiences of the two men informs their poetry by thinking about how these poems would be different if, as in the cases of Levertov, Wilder, and Nga, they were written by civilians. As the students did with "What Were They Like?" and "Deciding," they will analyze Weigl and Komunyakaa's poems for voice, themes, and poetic devices, and also discuss whether the speaker in each poem offers a counterpoint to the speaker of *The Things They Carried*. Also, students must address the issues of morality and guilt that are an integral part of O'Brien's book, as they arise in Weigl and Komunyakaa's poetry.

As a standing extra credit assignment, students are encouraged to conduct further research on each of these authors, and write a 1-2 page biography and analysis of a particular poet and a poem not discussed in class. Because there is such a wealth of poetry on the Vietnam War, for this assignment students will be allowed to use a poet and poem not discussed in class.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Read Aloud

The Things They Carried is perfect for reading aloud, so an appropriate amount of instructional time should be allotted to reading the book out loud in class; the reading needs of the students will determine how much time is necessary – in a class of skilled readers, less time will be needed for reading aloud. The read aloud strategy allows students to not only hear the rhythms of O’Brien’s writing, but also offers a way to discuss diction and syntax. Teachers may want to read an entire story or an excerpt aloud, have one student read to the class, or use paired readings to allow each student to practice and reinforce reading skills.

Reading aloud in class also allows the teacher to monitor comprehension and facilitate discussion of themes in the narrative, and the author’s use of literary devices (simile, metaphor, and especially, repetition). Because of the metafictional aspects of *The Things They Carried*, monitoring comprehension is especially important. It is recommended that “The Man I Killed” and “Notes,” which is a companion piece to the story “Speaking of Courage,” be read aloud in their entirety because the events in these stories, which involve “Tim O’Brien” the character, killing a man, (“The Man I Killed”), and then accepting responsibility for the death of one of his closest friends in the platoon (“Notes”), will be confusing to inexperienced readers, who often assume that the narrator is the author. As “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” both deal with the same event (the death of one of the soldiers in the platoon) reading these stories aloud will facilitate a better discussion of the contrast between the two accounts. This is important because one of the book’s central themes is contained in these stories: the shifting nature of what is true.

Journals

Throughout the unit, students will be required to write in journals. My students write journal entries three times per week regardless of what we are doing in class; but during the unit, students will be required to write on a daily basis. By writing daily, students will sharpen both their writing and analytical skills, as they will be required to think critically about the characters and events in the stories, and about the narrative itself.

For the teacher, these journals will serve as a way to monitor comprehension, as it will be evident by reading the entries what questions and issues the students need help

with; these issues should be discussed in class, prior to the day's reading and assignments. Journal grades should be assigned based on the depth of the students' responses to the text or to the assigned journal topic.

“VIETNAM, WE’VE ALL BEEN THERE” (Herr 260)

The first question my students will ask is, “why?” Why are they being required to study a war that ended before they were born, and why are they being forced to read a book that is almost 250 pages long? Answering this last question is easiest: all students need to read great literature so that they can have a better understanding of the world. One of the goals of Project Clear (HISD's curriculum) is for students to “respond to aesthetic and informational elements in a text,” and to “analyze narrative text structure and its features.” This unit will incorporate these aspects of the curriculum, but this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

While the response to this question is easy, perhaps even a bit pat, answering the question as to **why** the students are studying this most confusing war is a bit more problematic. Yet as this curriculum unit is being written, we stand on the brink of war with Iraq in 2002, and the lessons of Vietnam, both learned and forgotten or never learned at all, loom ever larger over the lives of every citizen of the world, especially those of my students, many of them just now turning 18 and looking at a career in the military after graduating from high school. In teaching this unit, I hope that my students will question, as Tim O'Brien does in *The Things They Carried*, the ideas of loyalty to one's country and the moral responsibility that we all have as citizens of the world. I also hope that by reading this book and thinking, deeply and meaningfully, about the issues and themes found in each of the stories, the students will come to understand the final lines of the book and see how stories can save us, can make us live forever:

I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story (O'Brien 246).

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: The Things We Carry

This is a pre-reading lesson to be conducted on the day of, or just prior to, beginning *The Things They Carried*.

Objectives

The students will (TSW) make inferences about characters in a work of fiction. TSW draw conclusions about characters in a work of fiction based on author's description.

Materials needed

Class set of *The Things They Carried*

Classroom setup

Desks should be arranged in a semi-circle; teacher should sit in the opening of the circle to facilitate discussion.

I am a firm believer in the idea that a genial, non-threatening classroom climate is crucial for student achievement because it is conducive to the type of risk-taking necessary for students to feel comfortable enough to challenge themselves and reach ever-higher goals with their reading and writing. Also, I want my students to get to know each other at a deeper level than is customary at large high schools, and I feel this lesson reflects these ideals.

Procedure

We all carry things with us in our purses, wallets, pockets, backpacks etc. For this lesson, each student will discuss briefly one item that he/she carries, and explain the significance of this object. Each student should spend no more than two minutes discussing the item, though this time limit can be adjusted according to the needs and size of the class.

After each student has spoken, the teacher should facilitate a discussion of what can be inferred about each student in the class based on what object that student shared with the class. This lesson provides an excellent portal into *The Things They Carried*, as the title story, which is the first story in the book, describes what is carried, both literally and figuratively, by each man in the platoon. Therefore, this story provides many opportunities for students to practice making inferences and drawing conclusions about each character based on what each person carries.

Lesson Plan 2: Inside Outside***Objectives***

TSW analyze a work of fiction for theme and literary techniques; make inferences and draw conclusions about a literary work.

Materials

Student copies of *The Things They Carried*; pen and paper

Set up

Desks should be in two circles, one circle inside the other.

Procedure

Prior to this class meeting, students are assigned a portion of the text to read on their own. They are required to write seven discussion questions on a piece of paper, to be

turned in to the teacher the following day (teacher should check to see if students wrote questions and then hand back to students). The class is then divided into two circles, with approximately 15 students in each circle. Students seated “inside” discuss the previous night’s reading based on the questions written for homework. Students in the outer circle make notes about the discussion but are not allowed to interject.

After 30 minutes students switch places and roles, and the discussion continues based on the notes students have taken and the questions written by those students initially seated in the outside circle. This lesson is completely student-led; teacher should serve only to clarify any questions asked by the students.

Lesson Plan 3: Writing

Objectives

TSW write for a specific purpose; TSW make inferences and judgments based on prior knowledge.

Materials

Pen and paper; copies of 1963 photo of the immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc and of Saigon police chief executing a suspected Vietcong captive during Tet Offensive, 1968. (Both photos available in Herring’s *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*.)

Procedure

Organize students into groups of four, with two copies of each photo per group. Students are to write for 6-7 minutes on one photo and then switch photos with other group members so that each student has written about each photo. Students are to describe what they see in each in each photo and then write about what they perceive is happening and why. After the time limit is up, students are to share in groups what they have written and then share with the whole class.

After whole-class discussion of writing, teacher should explain the background of each photo. The photo of the Buddhist monk should help students build empathy with Vietnamese, and the execution photo should help students build their understanding of the fact that the Vietnam War was filled with incidents of seemingly random violence and brutality. This activity serves as an excellent pre-reading lesson before reading “Style” or Levertov’s “What Were They Like?”

APPENDIX A

Parental Consent Form—due to the fact that “Platoon” and “Apocalypse Now” are both R-rated movies, the following form is useful for notifying parents prior to beginning the unit.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

For the next five weeks, your child will be reading Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and studying the Vietnam War. As a part of this unit, excerpts from the films *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam* will be shown in class. These films will help reinforce the material covered in O’Brien’s book, and help your child visualize what the soldiers in Vietnam went through.

I urge you to watch and discuss these films with your child before we begin this unit. Please notify me if you have any objections about the content of any of these films, and I will be sure to have an alternate assignment for your child.

If you do not have any objections, please sign this form in the space provided. Thank you for taking the time to participate in your child’s learning experience, and please feel free to contact me at the number listed below.

Sincerely,

(Teacher name and school phone)

(Parent signature)

APPENDIX B

Sample discussion questions; can also be used for a test or quiz.

Name _____

Date _____

“Good Form”

- 1) How does this story change your perceptions of the incident described in “The Man I Killed?”
- 2) How does “Good Form” relate to “The Man I Killed?”
- 3) How is the narrator “Inventing himself?” What does he mean by this?
- 4) How is “story-truth truer sometimes than happening truth?”
- 5) What are some of the reasons given in this story for why stories are so important?
- 6) Explain how Tim O’Brien the character, can “honestly” say he never killed anyone, yet also say, honestly, that he did kill someone?

“Field Trip”

- 1) Why does Tim re-visit the field where Kiowa died?
- 2) How has the field “swallowed” Tim’s “belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage?”
- 3) How has that night in the field, the night Kiowa died, affected Tim’s life?
- 4) What is the significance of the line, “I felt something go shut in my heart while something else swung open?”
- 5) Why does Tim bury Kiowa’s moccasins in the field?

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

Currie, Mark, ed. *Metafiction*. New York: Longman Group, 1995.

Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Sawyer, Scott. "In the Name of Love: An Interview with Tim O'Brien."
Mars Hill Review 4 (1996) : 117-126.

Teacher Resources

Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Students will read excerpts from "Breathing In," to gain further understanding of the mood of US troops in Vietnam.

Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The U.S. and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. 3rd ed.
New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1996.

Excerpts will provide students with context for the unit, pictures for writing and discussion, and information about the changing attitudes toward the war.

Hersh, Seymour. "The My Lai Massacre: An Atrocity Is Uncovered." *Reporting Vietnam, Part Two: American Journalism 1969-1975*. New York: Library Classics of The U.S., Inc., 1998.

Article explains My Lai and its aftermath; TSW understand psychological effects of the war and how they played a major role in the massacre. Also, TSW understand how news of the massacre influenced attitudes toward the war.

Johannessen, Larry R. *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English. Excellent ideas on how to make lessons on Vietnam come alive for students.

Jones, Thom. *The Pugilist at Rest*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.

Students will read the title story and "Break on Through." Both stories deal with psychological effects of the war.

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Camouflaging the Chimera." *The Language of Literature: American Literature*. Ed. Arthur Applebee et al. Evanston: McDougal Littell Inc., 2000.

Kwinter, Kerri. "Pranks and the Vietnam War." *Re Search: Pranks* (1988): 141-143.
TSW read article to understand some of the tactics used by Vietnamese forces against the U.S.

- Larsen, Wendy Wilder and Tran Thi Nga. "Deciding." Ed. Arthur Applebee et al. Evanston: McDougal Littell Inc., 2000.
- Levertov, Denise. *Poems 1968-1972*. New York: New Directions Books, 1987.
Students will read "What Were They Like?" and "Enquiry" as a way to see the beginnings of the anti-war movement in the U.S.
- Mangold, Tom and John Pencyate. *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*. New York: Berkley Books, 1985.
Provides harrowing accounts of the tunnels used by Vietnamese, and the special units of American soldiers called "tunnel rats" who fought underground.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.
This book **is** the curriculum unit. Stunning series of interwoven stories about the men fighting the war, and also about their lives "back in the world" after the war.
- O'Brien, Tim. "Writing Vietnam." President's Lecture. Brown University. 21 Apr. 1999.
- O'Nan, Stewart, ed. *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
Excellent teacher resource; includes poetry that may be read by students.
- Patterson, James T. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
Another excellent teacher resource; provides a good overview of the war and the events leading up to U. S. involvement.
- Schroeder, Eric James. *Vietnam: We've All Been There: Interviews With American Writers*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1992.
Interviews with Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien give valuable insight into their respective books.

Student Resources

- Myers, Walter Dean. *Fallen Angels*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1988.
Great young adult novel that mirrors deals with the Vietnam War, and deals with many of the same themes found in *The Things They Carried*. The book is told from the perspective of an 18-year-old who joins the army in order to give his life purpose and meaning.

Filmography

Good Morning, Vietnam. Directed by Barry Levinson. Buena Vista Pictures, 1987. (119 minutes)

Excerpts will show students the tension caused by GI's not knowing who the enemy was and also gain some insight into the effects of the war on the Vietnamese.

Platoon. Directed by Oliver Stone. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1987. (120 minutes)

Excerpts will show students the confusing nature of the battles, and for a My Lai-esque massacre.

Apocalypse Now. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. United Artists, 1979. (153 minutes)

Excerpts will show students sheer insanity of war and psychological toll the war takes on the soldiers.