The Things They Carried
Summary of the Novel

“The Things They Carried”
The details of Alpha Company’s physical possessions serve as O’Brien’s method for introducing and characterizing each of the men in the platoon: Rat Kiley, Norman Bowker, Kiowa, Ted Lavender, Henry Dobbins, Dave Jensen, Lee Strunk, and Mitchell Sanders. The weight of the men’s emotional burdens conveys the deeper meaning of the chapter’s and novel’s title. In this chapter, there are three distinct points of view. One is an unnamed (third person omniscient) narrator, the second is First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross (third person limited) and the third is Kiowa (also third person limited). These three narratives tie together to complement one another.

Cross’s narrative consists of an internal monologue, or stream of consciousness. The omniscient narrator pans out of this personal perspective to provide a more universal commentary. Kiowa’s narration balances these two through a practical perspective of one soldier’s musings after a day at war. Kiowa serves as O’Brien’s instrument to sum up the events of the day and personify the concepts developed by the omniscient narrator. Cross’s treatment of the narrative moves around in time. Presently, he is with Alpha Company, but memories of Martha, an object of Cross’s unrequited love, distract him from the matter at hand, and when Ted Lavender is shot in the head in the midst of Lieutenant Cross’s daydreaming, the reader is jolted into reality along with Cross and the rest of Alpha Company.

The event of Ted Lavender’s death is revisited many times throughout the chapter, and each time the event is revisited, new details are revealed. This technique is one O’Brien employs throughout the novel, functioning as an illustration of the impact of trauma on memory. The platoon’s response to Lavender’s death and its immediate aftermath – they smoke marijuana and burn down the village of Than Khe – seems irreverent and cold, but O’Brien deconstructs this theme of apathy in future chapters.

“On the Rainy River”
Upon receiving his draft letter, Tim makes a brief escape to the border of Canada, spending several days at the Tip Top Lodge as the only guest and awkward companion to owner Elroy Berdahl. Both the Rainy River and Elroy serve as symbols in the chapter. The river is literally the line Tim must cross if he is to choose escape from the draft. Elroy, a morally ambiguous character, stands in sharp contrast to many other adults Tim identifies in the chapter, from members of his town, to his parents, to the average American taxpayers whose views of the Vietnam War seem far too simplistic to Tim.

This is the first chapter in the novel where Tim’s fictional self is developed. He is a recent alumnus of Macalester College who has gained admission into Harvard Graduate School, a celebration that he must now defer due to his conscription. Tim thus struggles with anger and fear, noting the hypocrisy of those sending him to war. He characterizes himself, paradoxically, as a coward for going to war, an ironic juxtaposition that pervades the novel as a whole. The description of Tim’s summer job butchering pigs in a local factory serves as a foreshadowing of the dehumanization Tim will imminently undergo.

This chapter also introduces O’Brien’s hallmark meta-fictional style, particularly the imagined scene on the banks of the Rainy River. Tim imagines everyone from past history, present culture and future family members having a say in whether or not he should go to war. One of the most compelling parts of the chapter is Tim’s emotional breakdown on the river. He sits in a boat steered by Elroy Berdahl, who says nothing and makes no effort to acknowledge Tim’s display of emotion.
Elroy surreptitiously offers Tim money, a clear indication of support for Tim in the event that his choice is to escape to Canada. Tim declines the offer, returns home and goes to the war.

“How to Tell a True War Story”
O’Brien’s first person narrative in this chapter culminates in his statement, “A thing may happen and be a total lie. Another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (80). Though the title may initially convey a basic process analysis, O’Brien’s narration of “How to Tell a True War Story” transcends the form. Employing antithesis and paradox, O’Brien frames the stories of both Mitchell Sanders and Rat Kiley to explicate his commentaries and complex definitions of war stories: “True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis” (74); “To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace” (77); “It can be argued, for instance that war is grotesque, but in truth, war is also beauty” (77); and “Though it’s odd, you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead” (78).

Kiley’s brief story depicts his efforts to write a heartfelt letter to the sister of his best friend, Curt Lemon, who died in an explosion. Kiley is clearly upset when he never gets a response from the girl after all his sincere effort. Mitchell Sanders’ lengthier war story is not so personal. It is about a platoon pushed to the brink of insanity on a staleout when they hear a series of unfeasible and incongruous sounds that conflict with the setting. Though Sanders’ story is not logically believable, those in Alpha Company indulge his penchant for dramatization. They do not, however, indulge him in is his style of storytelling, which is cause for Sanders’ frustration. By the time Sanders concludes his tale, he is so frustrated by the response of his audience that he tells Tim that the moral of his story is total silence.

The paradoxes in the chapter compound the meaning of O’Brien’s commentary on the complexity of war stories and their moral ambiguities. At core, both Rat Kiley and Mitchell Sanders want to tell their stories simply for acknowledgement and validation, and neither one feels satisfied that he has met these objectives. Rat wants a response to his letter; Mitch wants to be understood. Late in the narrative, Tim threads a brief but gruesome memory into the narrative of gathering Curt Lemon’s remains after he is killed. The placement of this graphic memory in the chapter is careful. To frame his commentary intentionally, O’Brien makes sure that he has established his terms and applied them to Kiley and Sanders’ stories before disclosing his own the gory details.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”
The story of this chapter is Rat Kiley’s, framed by Tim. The title character, Mary Anne Bell, is Mark Fossie’s girlfriend, who manages to arrive in Vietnam after Fossie covertly arranges for her to travel to his remote location in a small medical detachment near the village of Tra Bong. Mary Anne enchants and surprises all the men in Fossie’s company with her curiosity about the war and her preoccupation with military logistics. Many assume that the chapter addresses gender inequity and feminism, since Mary Anne eventually shows a strong desire to be in combat. As Rat Kiley articulates, however, Mary Anne’s demonstration that war can be universally seductive trumps her defiance of feminine stereotypes. Her character also suggests that some people, regardless of gender, may be born “combat-ready,” though this skill may lie dormant and go untapped.

Mary Anne Bell arrives in Vietnam as a hometown American girl decked in fashionable and feminine culottes and sweater set. She never leaves Vietnam after she is transformed to savagery. Mark Fossie’s anxiety, as he witnesses his girlfriend undergoing this metamorphosis is notable and ironic, since such transformations are happening all around him with men. He discards his plan to marry Mary Anne in the future, and this sense of helplessness echoes throughout the chapter and the novel. A point of contrast in the chapter is the image Mark Fossie has idolized of Mary Anne versus the realistic assessment Rat Kiley has of her. Rat Kiley bears a love for Mary Anne bred by admiration for her capacity. Fossie’s final encounter with Mary Anne is haunting. The irony of the story’s ending is implied. Mary Anne Bell joins the missing; consequences are assigned, but after a
while, no one seems to care, hinting at O’Brien’s subtext about the disregard for Vietnam veterans both during and following the war.

“Speaking of Courage”
The meaning of this chapter’s title requires some unpacking. Throughout the chapter, which takes place in the mind of Norman Bowker, very little speaking occurs. Within Norman’s mind, he has a series of meta-fictional exchanges with his father, his former girlfriend and a faceless attendant behind an intercom at the A&W stand. The narrative is somewhat comparable to the first chapter, “The Things They Carried,” in which the technique of revisiting a traumatic event is repeated.

As Norman circles the lake of his Iowa hometown in his father’s Chevy, he recalls the evening when Kiowa died in combat. Norman drives around the lake on July 4. The Chevy, a consummate symbol of the American Dream, drives the same circuit over and over, a clear indication that Norman is stuck in a cycle. Norman says that he feels safe inside his father’s big Chevy, and as he drives, many of the details remain the same as he describes his town. This contrasts with how much he has changed internally. Norman has returned home to a sameness that causes him anxiety, and one major change, the marriage of his former girlfriend Sally Kramer (now Sally Gustafson) leaves him feeling that he has missed one of the few opportunities for happiness he might have had. He lives in his parents’ home, unemployed, with little sense of direction.

Norman’s thoughts repeatedly return to his failure to win the Silver Star of Valor. In graphic detail, he describes the night of Kiowa’s death in a field of waste. He dwells on his guilt over the incident; his frustration for not winning the Silver Star of Valor is actually a rehashing of the culpability he feels for not saving Kiowa’s life. O’Brien’s objective is to call into question how rewards for courage in fact mask the brutalities of war. The reader is left to wonder if Norman Bowker would be the tragic figure he is if he had saved Kiowa’s life.

When Norman pulls in to the A&W drive-in to order a meal, an abrupt carhop scolds him for not using an intercom to place his order. This insolent exchange conveys the sense of exclusion that Norman and many of his contemporary veterans feel as they attempt to assimilate back into “life as usual.” The chapter closes with an impressive display of fireworks over the lake, which Norman views as he immerses himself in the water, a troubling image that evokes his memory of trying to save Kiowa in the field of waste in Vietnam. As the fireworks explode, so too do the illumination rounds in Norman’s memory from combat. Norman’s other childhood friend Max, who died tragically by drowning, is referenced briefly in the chapter, as is a sentiment by Norman that this lake is not really intended for swimming, so that a foreshadowing of Norman’s future suicide is nuanced.

“In the Field”
The narrative picks up from the storyline in “Speaking of Courage,” beginning the morning after Kiowa has died in the field of waste. The narration shifts between Lieutenant Cross and the third person omniscient narrator also employed in the first chapter, “The Things They Carried.”

Neither Lieutenant Cross nor any member of Alpha Company has slept. Under Cross’s supervision, the men embark on their mission to recover Kiowa’s body. In his mind, Cross composes several versions of a letter to Kiowa’s father. His mental drafts of the letter vacillate between taking full responsibility for Kiowa’s death and writing a generic letter that avoids any statement of liability. Cross never writes or sends the letter, though he promises himself to do so at some point after the war.

Members of the platoon consider Cross to be at fault for Kiowa’s death, and Mitchell Sanders is particularly condemnng of Cross’s lack of discernment. They regard Kiowa’s body with a certain sense of sanctity and reverence, a rare and unique turn from the dark humor about death that members of Alpha Company usually express as a means of coping. Azar, whose apathy is notable throughout the novel, and who jokes that Kiowa has been “wasted in the waste” (158) before the
body is recovered, exhibits a brief but emotional response upon seeing Kiowa’s remains. As they recover Kiowa’s body, Norman Bower reassures Azar that he shouldn’t feel guilty for joking about Kiowa’s death, since it is simultaneously both “Nobody’s fault” and “Everybody’s” (168).

Cross continues to retreat mentally to images and memories of his life in New Jersey. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the field of waste around him, he envisions his town’s municipal golf course and the casual practice of playing a round. Both settings – the field in Vietnam and the golf course in New Jersey – are open landscapes where “games” are played. Clearly, Cross no longer wants the responsibility of leading these men.

The appearance of the young soldier, the unnamed boy, leaves readers speculating whether Tim has written himself into this character. O’Brien captures an ironic juxtaposition in the young man’s search for his girlfriend’s picture. While this young man feels responsible for Kiowa’s death, just as Jimmy Cross does, his will to live is evident in his efforts to recover this picture. The young man grasps at some sense of normality, just as Cross does in his own mental escapes to the golf course. As the chapter closes, the boy attempts to make a confession to Cross, who appears to disregard the young man. Cross sinks deeper into the waste and lets the field take him (169). The closing paragraph of the chapter contains Cross’s condemnation of himself, referencing the title: “In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever” (170).

“The Ghost Soldiers”
The chapter is narrated entirely from Tim’s first person point of view. When Tim gets shot for the second time in combat, his bullet wound becomes infected, an injury for which Tim blames the medic, Bobby Jorgensen. He compares Bobby to Rat Kiley, Bobby’s predecessor who, in Tim’s opinion, was far more courageous in treating Tim’s first gunshot wound during combat. Unlike Rat Kiley, an experienced medic, Bobby is a novice who must work up the courage to help Tim in the midst of chaos.

As Tim recovers in the hospital and accepts his new assignment in a much more comfortable setting outside of the combat zone, he has time to ruminate on the injustice of Bobby’s poor performance. Tim’s recovery is an embarrassing one, requiring ointment on his buttocks that seeps through his clothing and makes him look incontinent. He blames his physical suffering, and the ridicule he endures, directly on Bobby. When Bobby attempts a sincere apology, Tim will not accept it, though he ironically reflects, “I hated him for making me stop hating him” (190).

Tim’s anger at Bobby for being honorable and forthright underscores how much the war has changed his perspective to one of antagonism and revenge, “capable of evil” (199). His alliance with Azar to seek revenge on Bobby also emphasizes his moral decline. Azar takes great pleasure in helping Tim execute his plan to torture Bobby mentally while he is on night watch, a plan that proves a failure for a number of ironic reasons. Tim attempts to abort his mission after he feels enough damage has been done to Bobby, but Azar is unrelenting. He tells Tim that he is a “has been. One of those American Legion types, guys who like to dress up in a nifty uniform and go out and play at it,” characterizing Tim as “pitiful” (202). Tim breaks down by the end, when he witnesses Bobby maintaining his composure as he recognizes Tim’s hand in the ruthless prank. As Tim breaks down, confronting his own antagonism, Azar kicks him in the head. After his plot for revenge goes awry, Tim recognizes that the true enemy is within. The chapter closes with a sincere reconciliation between Tim and Bobby, who joke about killing Azar by scaring him to death. Bobby successfully treats the wound to Tim’s head, a notable gesture to illustrate how both men have changed.

©2013 Secondary Solutions
Purchaser may reproduce copies of the materials in this book for his/her classroom use only. Sharing or reproduction of any part of this book, or the book in its entirety, is illegal.
“The Lives of the Dead”
Within this chapter, Tim directly confronts the realities of death. The narration moves around in
time, from when Tim was a young boy who suffers the loss of his “girlfriend” Linda to brain cancer,
to the first dead body he sees on his tour of Vietnam.

As he begins his tour of duty, the members of Alpha Company initiate Tim into their fraternity,
encouraging him to shake hands with the corpse of an old man in a village that has been razed. Tim
cannot go near the body and fights nausea at the sight of it. Later that day, Tim expresses
embarrassment to Kiowa, who does not judge Tim for his natural response.

Via flashback, Tim describes the friendship and love he felt at the age of nine for Linda. He
describes through images the process of watching Linda deteriorate as she received treatment for
cancer. In one incident he describes from their class, a classmate bullies Linda for wearing a hat
during her treatments. By interweaving Linda’s death with all of the other deaths he witnesses in
Vietnam (one account involves harvesting bodies and loading them into a truck like cargo), he
offers a unique perspective. He speaks metaphysically of giving dead people a voice. One example
of this is how the platoon, seemingly joking about Ted Lavender’s death, in fact attempts to give him
a voice as his body is lifted away and they say goodbye.

Tim explains that even though Linda is dead, he can bring her to life on the page, just as Alpha
Company brought Ted Lavender to life only moments after his death. This encapsulates a key motif
utilized throughout the novel, not only by Tim but also by the members of Alpha Company. O’Brien
has revived those who died by recreating them in the novel, but he also addresses the living “dead,”
those veterans who came home from the war alive but wounded from bullets, shrapnel, PTSD,
depression, anxiety, and more. The closing line of the chapter and the novel identifies that as a
writer, he is “Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (233). As a veteran, Tim acknowledges
that a viable means by which his wounded life as a veteran can be healed is by sharing and telling
his stories.