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## The Connection Between Humans and Things in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried

Allison Polster

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# **The Connection Between Humans and Things in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried***

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

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Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

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Most will remember Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War narrative, *The Things They Carried*, for its exploration of the war experience of American soldiers and for its original style and form. While less conspicuous, O'Brien also provides a complex account of the role of things in relation to his characters throughout the collection of short stories. In my paper, I argue that the soldier characters depend on things to help them survive the war (physically and mentally) and that this strong dependence on things ends up having a damaging effect on the men. The soldiers' fixation on things plays a key role in establishing their feelings of alienation and disconnection from other people and in creating a break from reality which the soldiers experience. This disconnection leaves them obsessively longing for meaningful human interaction throughout the book.

In order to further my argument, I closely examine O'Brien's text and analyze the most significant interactions between people and things. Through investigating the soldiers' keepsakes, such as letters, pictures, and other tokens from loved ones, I expose an alternate reality that many of the soldiers create based on these keepsakes and the memories of home associated with them. By entering their alternate realities, the soldiers are able to temporarily escape the war. As the men constantly use this escape, the characters' connection to their reality of war and to their fellow soldiers becomes limited. The soldiers also rely on their keepsakes as outlets for emotions that they are afraid to express to the other soldiers due to their desire to seem brave and ruthless rather than cowardly. Similarly, the soldiers also redefine the uses of things other than keepsakes, such as supplies, in order to better serve their actual wartime needs. Their ability to redefine things illustrates the idea that meaning is not intrinsic in things, but gained through interaction with people.

I go on to suggest that, because the soldiers are so disconnected from women, they objectify the one American woman who comes to Vietnam, and, because they are so desensitized to death, they treat dead bodies and parts of dead bodies as objects (and even as material possessions). The fact that the soldiers are no more emotionally affected by the "human things" (objectified people, bodies, and body parts) than by the "non-human things" (keepsakes and supplies) illustrates a break from reality as they adopt the emotionless and inhuman persona that war demands. Without this disconnect that the Army seems to require, soldiers would be too emotionally distraught by the regularity of death and destruction to function effectively.

O'Brien's soldier characters use things as a crutch to ease the hardships of war but are also crippled by this use of things. Through their intense connection to and dependence on things, they become more and more like things themselves as they struggle to hold on to their sense of humanity and identity in the dehumanizing climate of war. The connection O'Brien makes between humans and things throughout *The Things They Carried* adds depth to his assertion that everything blends together in the fog of war. The difference between human and thing becomes insignificant as the war becomes more surreal than real to the soldiers because the reality they have always known, only exists in their fantasies (alternate realities).

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The Vietnam War, like other wars before it, took an enormous toll on the youth that served. Unlike other American wars, Vietnam coverage was broadcast on televisions across the country and sparked great protest and controversy in the United States, dividing the country between those in support of the war and those against it. But the Vietnam War was not only different for civilians in the United States. In Vietnam, American soldiers were experiencing a war unlike the wars of their fathers and grandfathers. Many soldiers in Vietnam had trouble identifying any noble purpose of the war whereas goals such as stopping Hitler, for example, had given soldiers of the past a strong sense of purpose. Part of this lack of purpose came out of the difficulty soldiers had identifying an enemy. Because of the Vietcong's extensive use of booby traps, American soldiers were killed without ever seeing human enemies. Additionally, the Vietcong were not always easily recognizable because the group recruited many peasant men and women of all ages. This lack of purpose and uncertainty surrounding the enemy paired with factors such as the draft – which quickly and unexpectedly uprooted young men, the foreignness of the land in Vietnam, and the loss of soldiers' identities in the Army created unique psychological and physical struggles for soldiers.

Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War narrative, *The Things They Carried* (1990), depicts these struggles as the underlying factors defining every soldier's war experience. Over the past 20 years, *The Things They Carried* has earned a spot in the American literary canon and is widely considered to be one of the best books about the Vietnam War experience. O'Brien himself felt that this book was special for its unique literary style. In a 1991 interview with Martin Naparstek in

*Contemporary Literature*, O'Brien comments, "it's a new form, I think. I blended my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary" (8).

At the center of this "new form" is the fact that the book's narrator and main character is also named Tim O'Brien. Even though O'Brien was in fact a soldier in Vietnam, the piece is not a factual autobiography or memoir (as almost all of the stories are completely fictional). Through this choice of character name, O'Brien strives to demonstrate the soldiers' overwhelming sense of uncertainty, for the reader. He wants to confuse the reader and to make him or her constantly question what is fact and what is fiction. By leaving the reader slightly confused and uncertain, O'Brien attempts to help the reader understand the feeling of confusion and uncertainty the soldiers experienced due to their inability to understand what they were accomplishing in Vietnam and even who their enemies were. Readers, like the soldiers, have a hard time deciphering truth from fiction in this book.

O'Brien's unusual choice of name for his main character is matched by the unusual content in the book as a whole. The book, a collection of intertwining stories, is widely considered to be a piece of war literature, but it is not full of battlefield sequences. Instead, it offers more minute details of war, stories that take place outside of the war, and commentary on the nature of storytelling and war writing. The focus is not on character development or any substantial plot but instead on how war affects the characters and on how their stories are told. Additionally, the piece is not chronological but instead focuses on a few key

incidents, as told by different people, from different angles. O'Brien's opinionated voice, some familiar characters, and certain themes are all that thread the short stories together. The obvious absence of intimate human relationships in the lives of the soldier characters and the equally obvious centrality of things throughout the work add to the unusual nature of his piece.

The title of O'Brien's piece, *The Things They Carried*, offers the first hint at this lack of human connection and strong connection with things. The title fails to mention any relationship between humans but does explain a relationship between humans and things, thus providing the first clue that the soldiers' relationships with things is more significant to the work than the relationships between the characters. The strategic way in which O'Brien worded the title adds to this initial hint at the importance of things. First, O'Brien's inclusion of the word, "carried," points to the idea that the soldiers' things burden them, as they must bear their weight. Secondly, the fact that the things are the subject of the title and the "they" just helps to describe the "things," points to the fact that things are the main subjects of the book as well as central to the characters' lives. Lastly, O'Brien uses "things" instead of naming specific items or burdens and "they" instead of specific characters in order to keep the title universal. Many different characters carry many different things throughout the book, and each can be read in the context of this generic title.

Additionally, O'Brien's use of the term, "thing," in his title and throughout his book, actually carries a lot of weight on its own.<sup>1</sup> The study of

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<sup>1</sup> As Rebecca Zorach explains in a 2005 *Boston Globe* article about the growing



things, or “thing theory,” has become increasingly visible in scholarly work in recent years. In an interview, one “thing theorist,” scholar Bill Brown, explains that the study of things is not new but that newly, theorists have been looking back at works of the past and recognizing what they were trying to say about things. Today, the study of things has become an interdisciplinary focus of significance.<sup>2</sup>

“Thing theory” – which Brown helped to develop in his book, *A Sense of Things* and in an issue of *Critical Inquiry*, all about things, that he edited – offers insight into the meaning of things. In literature, “thing theorists” attempt to understand the value and meaning of things that used to be looked at simply as part of the environment or backdrop on which the story would take place. Brown explains, “part of the literary critical task has been to actually try to add substance to all of that detail.”

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study of things, “it’s almost impossible to write about a ‘thing’ trend in scholarly writing without getting tangled in one’s own words. ‘Thing’ is almost maddeningly flexible. Colloquially, things are not just physical objects but ideas, words, fleeting thoughts, states of affairs, and actions.” Throughout my piece, I will avoid using the word “thing” when it is not in reference to things as O’Brien and “thing theorists” use them. Still, because the word is so important to O’Brien’s work and to “thing theory,” (as no other word carries its exact same meaning) I will be forced to use “things” with unusual frequency throughout my work.

<sup>2</sup> Brown mentions two possible explanations of why the study of things, which he refers to as “thing theory,” has grown in popularity. First, he believes that the presence of computers in our lives and the virtual world has created a fear (especially in the realm of literary thing theory) that things – in particular, the book – will eventually disappear. His second explanation is that because of the environmental problems and discussion of global warming, people fear the loss of the most important thing, the earth. Through these fears, people’s awareness of things has increased.

In removing things from the background, Brown explains the significance of the interactions between humans and things. Brown establishes the basis for his idea of a thing as relational. A thing only gains meaning for people, through its connection to people. Things themselves are not innately meaningful but through their connection with an other, they gain meaning or emotional value to people. Through their connection to humans, things can have value far beyond their use-value.

Just as Brown and others attempt to find the value that has long been viewed as background, O'Brien attempts to force the reader to view the things in his book in the foreground by using the word "things" in the first place and by choosing it as the subject of the title. Things are the subjects of O'Brien's piece, not just the objects. This move situates things on the same level as the characters which serves to make the strong connections between the characters and things possible. In other words, O'Brien does not discuss objects, as Brown defines them, in his piece.

These things that O'Brien forces out of the background take many forms in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien puts special emphasis on a wide variety of things ranging anywhere from a letter from home to a necklace made of human tongues. For the purposes of this paper, I will group the things they carry – which affect the soldiers deeply – into two main groups, non-human things and human things. In non-human things, I will include the soldiers' keepsakes from home as well as wartime supplies. In human things, I will include people, dead bodies, and body parts that are treated like things by the soldiers. At most basic, each group is

different physically. Additionally, the relationships the soldiers have with these two groups may evoke very different reactions in a reader. Still, to the soldier characters, the two categories are not as different as one may suspect, thus allowing the groups to be comparable and considered “things” in the first place. The fact that the characters do not notice much of a difference between these two groups demonstrates how desensitized to death the soldiers have become and how disconnected from humans (and simultaneously how connected to things) the war has made them.

While these two categories can be grouped in this way for my purposes, they are not so clear-cut in the book. Throughout the stories in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien emphasizes the important theme of war causing opposites to become equivalents and everything to bleed into each other:

Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, love into anarchy, civility into savagery (82).

Like order and chaos, love and hate, and ugliness and beauty, non-human things and human things also blur together in the chaotic haze of war. The soldiers’ senses of control over these things similarly becomes blurred as things often take control of the men. As the soldiers try to regain control of their lives in general, which the army has greatly overtaken, the soldiers struggle to regain power over their things. Still, sometimes the soldiers succeed in overpowering things by changing the meaning of things, and, in doing so, alter the things’ power over them. Other times, they fail, letting the emotions things evoke in them get the best of them and interfere with their lives. This back and forth of power between

things (both non-human and human) and soldiers takes a front seat in the piece, as it is more prevalent and significant than the interactions between the soldiers and any human enemy and among the company of soldiers themselves.

In addition to a section on non-human things and one on human things, I will also include a section on how and why intimate human interaction is lacking throughout the book. The only two true intimate human connections, which I will define as relationships that O'Brien describes as being "real," (since he uses this term selectively) happen outside of the war (both before O'Brien goes to Vietnam). These relationships have not been affected by war. Therefore, the participants involved in each relationship still feel human and can still connect on a human level without relying on things. The individuals, including O'Brien, feel the capacity to expose themselves and to be understood. During and after the war, many of the soldiers fear that they will never again be able to express themselves fully or be completely understood by anyone. Because soldiers depend on things, experience a sense of unreality (or alternate reality), fear of seeming cowardly, and are apprehensive about getting close to anyone who may die, they become distant from others and end up isolated and alienated. As a result, intimate relationships between characters do not exist in the war. The absence of these satisfying relationships leave the soldiers yearning for someone to love them, understand them, and listen to them.

While the soldiers long for love, companionship, and understanding, they are often too scared and embarrassed to show this side of themselves to the other soldiers. Therefore, the soldiers' relationships with things become especially

useful to help soldiers release emotion. In turn, they become so used to using things as outlets for emotion that they have trouble expressing emotion to others without using things as a crutch. If they do connect with others, it is only through the barrier of a thing.

The soldiers also use their things to connect them to reality. The connection between things and reality exists even beyond O'Brien's piece. In his interview, Brown mentions theorist Roland Barthes's essay, "The Reality Effect." Brown explains that the premise of this essay was that in literature, the detail (the things) existed for the sole purpose of proving the reality of the story. While things have a more complex role in *The Things They Carried* and in "thing theory," the soldier characters (in this case) connect things with reality, because they are tactile in a war that is hazy and abstract to the soldiers. Still, not even these tactile elements are able to avoid the ambiguities of war. On one hand, their keepsakes remind them that a world at home does exist and their weapons remind them of their current status as soldiers in Vietnam. But at times, these things, temporarily remove the soldiers from one time and place, thus creating alternate realities. The soldiers move back and forth between these realities, thus creating a state of confused reality in their current actual state of war. By living simultaneously in two realities, they become disconnected from their current place and time and thus from others within their place and time. The alternative realities the soldiers experience are created, like a dream, with both pieces of reality and elements of fantasy. Many soldiers base them on people and experiences they had in their lives at home, but recreate these memories – editing

and improving them to create more pleasant memories of their pasts. These edited memories or fantasies serve to help them feel like everything stopped at home when they left and that their girlfriends, families, and friends are not moving on without them. They serve to give the soldiers hope that if they can make it through Vietnam, a good life, the one of their fantasies, will be waiting at home. They not only provide the soldiers with hope for the future, they also provide an escape from their current wartime reality. By escaping to their alternate realities, the soldiers can catch a break from all of the baggage and stress of war. Without this outlet, the soldiers would have trouble mentally surviving the war.

Before Bill Brown and others constructed the theoretical discourse, “thing theory,” Tim O'Brien gave a striking and complex account of the interaction between humans and things in war in his collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*. In *The Things They Carried*, the soldiers at war depend on things as a means of both physical and psychological survival. While they must depend on their things, they are burdened by the weight of these things at the same time. Physically, things assist soldiers simply as a gun can offer protection and a poncho can offer warmth and shelter. These things burden the soldiers as each adds weight to the rucksack they must carry as they trek through Vietnam. Psychologically, soldiers' dependence on things becomes more complicated as the lines between human and thing are blurred due to the chaos of war. They use things to help them deal with aspects of war that go against human nature such as death, separation, and constant, unrelenting stress. Because they must behave without emotion in their soldier duties, they become similar to things themselves:

pawns being moved around by the U.S. Army. The soldiers depend on their things to keep them grounded, yet this fixation on things, actually lends to their sense of unreality, fantasy, and disconnection from other people.

## **NON-HUMAN THINGS:**

### *KEEPSAKES*

During wartime, keepsakes, or tokens from loved ones at home, increase in meaning to the soldiers. Since soldiers are separated from their loved ones at home, things – such as letters and pictures – become their only connection to family, friends, and home life and one of the only outlets for emotion. While this dependence on keepsakes at first seems to be normal and natural, the characters begin to depend too much on their things of love and through this dependence, alter their senses of reality.

While it seems almost natural to take keepsakes with you when you will be gone for a long time and while it is healthy to remember people and memories of home, keepsakes end up weighing a great deal on soldiers because they place more value than is typical on their things. Because they use things as outlets for emotions, the soldiers try to elevate their things' statuses or values to that of a person. This creates an alternate reality in which people and things share similar bonds to what typically is shared between people.

The increased value they place on these items also emerges out of their expectations of their things to act magically. They often keep things for good luck, thus adding an additional magical value to ordinary things. Similarly they expect their things to transport them and to provide an escape from the war. Their things often lead them out of the war (mentally), and into their alternate reality of home. It seems that through their letters and pictures, they summon loved ones at home to keep them safe in the war. They only trust those people at home with their lives and thus only decide to trust the things from those people rather than their fellow soldiers. Many of these things also come from women. As there is a lack of American women in Vietnam, these things end up replacing the women. Thus these things take up the roles of women to the men, roles that include confidant, protector, and lover. They expect magic from them and in a way they get it.

Additionally, personal things, or keepsakes, become intertwined with soldiers' identities. The personal things each soldier carries differentiate him from other soldiers. Thus, personal things combat the loss of individuality that occurs in the Army where soldiers have no control over aspects of identity such as their dress or their hair.

Many soldier characters transfer the memories they associate with their things into imaginary women who they treat as their imaginary girlfriends. These imaginary relationships are based on real women from home. While their origin remains based on reality, the soldiers completely re-imagine their relationships with these women, creating fantasies that counter their harsh reality of war.



Through these imaginary women and through the soldiers' things connected with these women, the soldiers attempt to escape the war and have the option of visiting a state of fantasy and love.

The situations surrounding Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's letters, pictures, and pebble from Martha, an unnamed soldier's picture of Billie, and soldier Henry Dobbins's ex-girlfriend's stockings all evoke similar versions of the imaginary woman figure. All three women, in reality, are no longer with their soldier counterparts or, in the case of Martha and Jimmy, have never been with them. Yet the three soldiers fail to recognize this fact and instead decide to revel in the imaginary, creating three imaginary women that, to various degrees, love them back. All of these men have very special connections to the things they own that remind them of these women at home. Because keepsakes are all the soldiers physically have to connect to their imaginary girlfriends, they come to treat their things with special care. For the men, the things come to represent their imaginary girlfriends and they treat the things as such: many physically interact with things by touching them, smelling them, and tasting them to get as physically close to these women as possible.

O'Brien unfolds the depth of Jimmy Cross's relationship with his imaginary version of Martha – a woman he knew and loved in college who sends him letters, pictures, and tokens – in a quick progression. At first, O'Brien describes simply and directly, "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha" (1). But by the second sentence of the book – "They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in

plastic at the bottom of his rucksack” (1) – O’Brien already hints at Cross’s determination to change the letters’ meanings, and then, at the same time, Martha’s feelings. O’Brien first admits that Cross wished the letters to be love letters, which seems harmless enough. But soon after, O’Brien takes Cross’s wishes a step further by acknowledging that he not only wished but he pretended. The letters “were signed Love, Martha, but Lieutenant Cross understood that Love was only a way of signing and did not mean what he sometimes pretended it meant” (2).

While this love begins innocently and offers a means through which to mentally escape the war, Cross begins to fantasize about Martha more and more and becomes “a bit distracted” when leading his men (2). O’Brien writes, “Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha,” meaning that Jimmy Cross carried his love for Martha as they walked (3). Typically, O’Brien describes the soldiers as humping supplies and items that are physically weighty. Since the weight of the pictures, letters, and charms Martha sends Cross are negligible in weight, by humping his love, O’Brien points to a psychological version of the word, more aligned with being burdened by something – in this case, his love for Martha. O’Brien implies that Cross’s love for Martha added more weight (emotionally) to what he already was “humping,” – which included the safety and success of his entire company. As Cross begins to lose control over his fantasy of Martha, her memory and the things associated with memories of her take a toll on Cross and his troop. Daydreaming about Martha affects his ability to lead and therefore

makes the safety and success of his company more difficult and thus a bigger burden.

Increasingly, Cross's mental image of Martha has a damaging power over him. He has a hard time turning down the escape that her image offers, thus deteriorating his ability to focus in the field. Throughout the "The Things They Carried," Cross gets so caught up in his imaginary relationship with Martha that he mentally checks-out every so often in fantasy. As the leader of the squad, random and unintentional breaks from reality become dangerous. When soldier Ted Lavender is killed, Cross blames himself because he was daydreaming about Martha when it happened. To deal with the pain of the loss and his guilt, he tries to make himself hate Martha. He wants to destroy the imaginary Martha because his love for her becomes the enemy. His love for Martha, in Cross's eyes, led to Ted Lavender's death. Cross finally decides to burn Martha's pictures and letters in order to try to rid himself of her burden, but does so fully aware that it will provide no relief because "the letters were in his head" (23).

In order to rid himself of Martha, his first thought is to rid himself of the things that connect them. This points to the fact that Cross begins to see the letters and pictures of Martha as the imaginary woman, herself. This idea that the letters could leave the paper and become part of Cross ("the letters were in his head") also emphasizes their power. The fact that Cross realizes that his letters were already in his head blurs the line even more between things and body. The meaning of the letters is not tied very tightly to its physical structure. Instead the

meaning is permanent even though its physical being may not be. It moves easily and unintentionally from thing to person.

Even though it may be ineffective, as Cross realizes, the soldiers destroy things throughout the book to help ease the pain of loss<sup>3</sup>. In Cross's case, he decides to burn the letters as a sort of instant relief. Burning them offered closure that leaving them behind would not, because he could actually watch them turn to dust. Since the soldiers often deal with death through more death and destruction, once Lavender is killed, Cross feels the need to destroy something, just as Rat Kiley, the medic, later needed to kill the baby water buffalo in "How to Tell a True War Story": "The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world" (79). The soldiers use things in this way, again, because of the lack of a specific type of wartime human interaction, one with a human enemy. The men rarely encounter human enemies, so they must find other outlets for blame. Because the men feel as though they have control over their things, they often place blame, or in this case, take a revenge on things.

Whether he burns the items for closure, for revenge, or even just for escape, Cross does not burn the things out of convenience. O'Brien explains that "there was a steady rain falling, which made it difficult, but he used heat tabs and

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<sup>3</sup> Destruction of things is not the only method the soldiers use to deal with loss through things. Sometimes soldiers place blame on things to ease their own guilt and other times become fixated on their things, escaping through them, in order avoid thinking about their loss. Both of these methods will be discussed throughout this section of my paper.

Sterno to build a small fire” (23). He went out of his way to burn the things and to burn them quickly, thus demonstrating the importance of the gesture, even though he realized the lack of effect it would have. Just because the things are out of sight, does not mean that they are out of mind for Cross, just as Martha who is across the world, is still not out of Cross’s mind. Even Martha’s memory transcends her body for Cross just as the fantasy the letters offer Cross will transcend the letters.

This moment when Cross considers burning the pictures and letters seems reminiscent of young American men burning their draft cards. This could have been intentional by O’Brien (author) because soon after, O’Brien (character) recounts the fear he felt when he received his draft notice in the story “On The Rainy River.” Young men burned the cards to stay in the States, thereby excusing themselves from the war. Cross burned the letters and pictures in order to stay in Vietnam (mentally), and to be excused from the overbearing burden of loving Martha. He came to the realization that he “couldn’t burn the blame” of Lavender’s death and that burning them – like burning the draft cards – would not make very much of a difference (23). Cross would continue to be imprisoned by his feelings for Martha and similarly, draft card burners could only make a statement through their action, but would not be off the hook. Neither act could bring about the complete desired outcome. The characters are almost surprised when destroying, fixating on, or blaming things has no effect on their lives. They seem to forget that things only have meaning in the first place through their interaction, according to “thing theory.”

The morning after burning her pictures and letters, “everything seemed part of everything else, the fog and Martha and the deepening rain” (24). While fog and rain may not be considered tangible things like a gun or a letter, Martha is still grouped together with two inanimate things. As an invention of Cross, Martha fits in with these things as all three things are burdens on Cross as a foot soldier. Throughout, O’Brien asserts that in war, things blur into one another. With this comment, O’Brien is expressing that people are no exception.

As Cross’s obsession progresses, he not only mentally fantasizes about his image of Martha, but even becomes physically engaged with the things that are connected to her. At the beginning, O’Brien mentions that Cross “would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there” (1). Here again, the thing, the envelope, replaces Martha for Cross. Cross can only connect physically with Martha through this piece of paper because she is not in Vietnam and because their love affair is only imaginary.

Later, Cross receives a “simple pebble” as a gift from Martha. The pebble is described as “an ounce at most” and as “weightless,” but Cross analyzes the gift so thoroughly, that it emotionally outweighs its actual physical weight. The good-luck pebble would only be a “simple pebble” had it not been sent to him by Martha. Instead, he begins to treat the pebble as he did Martha’s envelopes by interacting with it in an unusual physical way. As he walks, he carries the pebble in his mouth, a very intimate place. “On the march, through the hot days of early April, he carried the pebble in his mouth, turning it with his tongue, tasting sea salt and moisture” (8). This placement evokes sexuality that the smooth stone has

come to represent through its connection with Martha. Martha had carried the pebble in her breast pocket for many days, so the pebble's closeness to Martha's body begins to represent her body to Cross: "they were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue" (12). Additionally, it seems like Cross wants to keep the pebble so close to him, that he decides to keep it physically inside of himself (in his mouth). Cross cares so deeply about the pebble that he wants it to become part of himself and even considers swallowing it, later in the chapter.

In his treatment of the envelope, Cross exposes his repressed lust and longing for Martha. Because interaction with women is rare in Vietnam, Cross again replaces this important human connection with a connection to a thing. For Cross, the things gain power and sexual meaning through touching Martha's body. They transfer the power to Cross through touching his body. Thus, the pebble works as a vessel through which Cross feels he can connect to Martha in a physical sense.

Cross's thoughts of and love for the imaginary Martha and the things associated with her affect Cross physically as well. His feelings become so intense that they seem gruesome and war-like:

Dense, crushing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered (11).

The idea of Martha becomes an overpowering and oppressive obsession for Cross; she becomes super-human as her love has the power to paralyze Cross. This super-human element serves as a reminder that she, as Cross thinks of her, is not real. The physical distance between Cross and Martha allows for Cross's

understanding of her as super-human as from a distance, anything or anyone can seem flawless or be imagined as such.

To compensate for this distance from Martha and from home, Cross imagines being as close as possible to Martha. He imagines being so close to her that he is actually inside of her and “smothered” by her. Cross’s desire to be inside of her and “smothered” by her also evoke his sexual yearnings. His desire to “breathe her blood” points to his need to become one with her. Cross exposes another layer of emotion for his imaginary Martha in this statement as it can be read as a desire to be nurtured, cared for, and protected. Not only does Cross look to Martha for sexual love (or lust) but also for maternal love. The fact that Cross wants to “sleep inside” Martha evokes the image of a baby, safe in a mother’s womb. Ironically, his attempt to seek comfort and security in the image of Martha actually leads him into a more precarious situation, more war-like and dangerous than the war itself. This irony emerges as O’Brien again blurs the lines separating different things and concepts in the context of war. In this case, when felt intensely enough, love bleeds into war, according to O’Brien.

The kind of uncontrollable love he feels for Martha, who is worlds away, is based in his alternate reality that emerges out of his imaginary version of her. The existence of this alternate reality leaves him in a constant state of confused reality in which he switches realities unwillingly. His inability to stay in one place and time, mentally, does in fact make the escape of Martha very dangerous.

The intensity with which he loves Martha seems to be more graphic, grotesque, and dangerous than the war itself. O’Brien expresses feelings of love



as more intense than scenes of war in order to again blur the lines between opposites: in this case, love and war. This intensity of emotion also signals that he is much more affected by his things from Martha and the Martha he created for himself than by actual wartime human interactions. The role of a real human enemy is thrust upon the imaginary woman because no real human enemy interaction presents itself to the soldiers. Through this projection, Cross begins to hate Martha. He still loves her but he hates her because he feels like he is losing control, as he becomes incapable of entering and leaving the alternate reality – of which she is the center – at his own will. Because Cross essentially created the Martha he worships, he is frustrated by his inability to control his emotions toward her and the things she sends him.

O'Brien does not mention Martha, or her letters and pictures again after his first two short stories, "The Things They Carried" and "Love" which both center around her affect on Cross. Yet Cross remains a central character throughout the book. Martha herself is not important as a character but helps to define Cross as a person early in the book. His interactions with her letters, pictures, and pebble become part of his identity and motivate his own actions throughout the work. The loss of Ted Lavender because of his fixation on Martha changes the way he leads his troop and how his soldiers view him. Thus, the things from Martha not only lead to his creation of an alternate reality and to his imaginary human interactions but, they also influence his current human interactions.

The men do not seem to respect Cross or at least they do not respect him as a leader. More than anyone else, Cross still seems to be in his own world as he continues to escape through daydream. In a later story, "In the Field," the soldiers search a "shit field" for the body of Kiowa, a soldier in the company who drowned there the night before. The soldiers finally find Kiowa's body but decide not to tell Cross who is in his own world. He seems to be mesmerized by an unnamed soldier searching the "shit field" for a lost picture of his "girl." He is so fixated on this boy because he can relate due to his own obsession with pictures and letters from a girl. Instead of searching for Kiowa, Cross also focuses on writing a letter to Kiowa's father in his head. When the soldiers discuss what to do after finding Kiowa's body, Norman Bowker, a soldier in Cross's company says, "'What we should do, I guess ... is tell the LT.' Mitchell Sanders shook his head. 'Just mess things up. Besides, the man looks happy out there, real content. Let him be'" (174). They seem to be looking out for Cross, the leader, rather than the other way around because of his fragile emotional state. Because Cross lives in a world of daydreams about letters, pictures, and love, he becomes alienated from the men in his troop.

The one character Cross relates to, the boy searching for the picture of his "girl," is so focused on his picture, that he wants nothing to do with Cross when Cross approaches him, thus removing himself from human connection as well. For the boy, the photograph of the girl is the only thing that makes the soldier not completely anonymous. In fact, while the soldier remains nameless, even the girl

in the picture is named – Billie. So the soldier’s only identity is truly linked with Billie.

The boy is forced to recognize the connection between his own identity and the image when the picture is lost after the explosion. At this point, the anonymous soldier had “lost everything. He’d lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his girlfriend’s picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself” (171). While he has lost all of this, he solely concerns himself with finding the picture and becomes highly emotional and aggravated about his loss. The picture of Billie has a strong power over the soldier: in his mind, the loss of it means the loss of Billie forever and even more significantly, since his identity is tied to Billie’s, he could also lose his sense of self. When Cross first sees the boy, he is covered in mud, so Cross cannot figure out who he is. At this point, O’Brien comments, “the filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier, which was exactly how Jimmy Cross had been trained to treat them, as interchangeable units of command” (163). Thus the Army does not view the men as humans but rather objectifies them, as tools to use toward their own ends. Without the subplot surrounding Billie’s missing photograph, the soldier would remain a nameless and forgettable soldier. The soldier is only portrayed as human because of the value he places on the photograph as a symbol of love, hope, and fantasy. Without Billie, he loses an important reminder of his humanity: that he is a human being with a heart and not just one of the Army’s killing machines.

Like Jimmy Cross who imagines that by signing “Love” at the bottom of each letter, Martha actually meant she loved him, the boy uses his imagination and pretends to be with Billie. The boy still refers to Billie as being his girlfriend or his “girl” and, through the picture, can live in an imaginary world until he is prompted to admit that they are no longer together.

A picture, for the unnamed boy and all of the other characters (as O’Brien mentions, pictures were the most commonly carried keepsake) is the ideal means through which an alternate reality is possible, by its very nature. A picture is a stop of action at a specific time and place, that can later be transported to other times and places. The soldiers like to think of their lives at home in stop-action, so they can imagine going home to a life like they left it. They bring these fantasies of home with them, interpreting them as they please.

When the boy is confronted by the idea that his picture may be gone for good, he snaps back to war-reality. He also admits that they did not even end on good terms: “she won’t *send* another one. She’s not even my *girl* anymore, she won’t... Man, I got to find it” (172). By including the italicized words, O’Brien seems to demonstrate the boy’s frustration and defensiveness when he is forced to confront reality. After telling Jimmy Cross about his failed relationship, the boy quickly regresses back into comfort and imagination by saying that he must continue his hunt.

Additionally, the fact that the boy chooses to look for a picture of a girl he is no longer dating over looking for Kiowa, a friend, shows the power the photograph has over him and his ability to use it to escape reality. Through his

decision to obsess over the picture, rather than over Kiowa, the boy avoids dealing with Kiowa's death. He also strengthens his already strong connection to the image by making it a first priority and by depending on it to ease the emotional toll of Kiowa's death. The strength of his connection to the thing leads him to wander off alone in the "shit field." His relationship with the photograph is enhanced while his connections to his troop and to his dead friend, Kiowa, weaken. Ultimately, he becomes more isolated from his troop, just like Cross.

Similarly, O'Brien dedicates a chapter, "Stockings," to a pair of stockings that belonged to Henry Dobbins's ex-girlfriend. The stockings have many different meanings for Dobbins, none of which seem to change after Dobbins is dumped by his girlfriend. The stockings offer Dobbins memories of his girlfriend, security, luck, and comfort. The stockings' meaning seems to be unchanged by the breakup because Dobbins continues to wear and use the stockings in the same way, thus relishing in a past that no longer exists.

Like Cross and the unnamed soldier, Dobbins situates himself in an alternate reality in which nothing has changed since he left for the war. While all three characters greatly depend on their things of love, their primary use of them differs. Because Cross must completely create his relationship with Martha in his alternate reality – unlike the unnamed soldier and Dobbins who simply keep living in a past that did, in fact, exist (the girls were actually their girlfriends at one point) – Cross primarily uses his things of love to add to his imaginary world. He constantly analyzes a picture of Martha playing volleyball and uses it to ponder whether or not she is a virgin. He also imagines Martha on the beach

finding the pebble she sent him, and even uses the letters as proof of her love for him (as he pretends that “Love” means non-platonic love). The unnamed soldier, on the other hand, uses the picture of Billie as a form of identity, as without her, he is indistinguishable from any other soldier. Dobbins also uses his thing of love, his stockings, in a completely different way: as a means of protection. Dobbins believes that the stockings (and his girlfriend that the stockings come to represent) keep him safe and alive. By always wearing the protective stockings on his uniform, he equates the stockings to a helmet or a gun as he uses them to keep him safe from fatality in the war. The fact that the three soldier characters all use their things of love for different primary purposes alludes to the idea that the soldiers do have some control over their things, even if they are eventually overpowered by them. It also shows the versatility of things as meaning (or use in this case) is not intrinsic in the thing but gained through interaction with people (the soldier characters).

Dobbins wears the stockings around his neck, sometimes puts them over his mouth and nose, and even sleeps with them at night. Dobbins is extremely careful with these stockings because of their important meaning to him: he “would make a ritual out of arranging the nylons around his neck, carefully tying a knot, draping the two leg sections over his left shoulder” (118). The fact that he turns the tying of the stockings to his body into a ritual also points to the idea that Dobbins saw these stockings as a good luck charm, one that worked when arranged in a specific way. Because Dobbins was never harmed while wearing the stockings, he not only thought of them as good luck, but as magical. After his

break-up, Dobbins states, “the magic doesn’t go away” (118). Dobbins, like the unnamed boy, depends heavily on his keepsake. In this case, he trusts the stockings with his life. He seems to transpose his feelings of trust and security he had in his relationship with his ex-girlfriend onto these stockings, thus trusting and relying on them an unreasonable amount. With this false sense of security and belief in the super-powers of a pair of stockings, Dobbins relieves himself of his reality of death and war.

Dobbins treats the stockings much like Cross treats his pebble from Martha. Not only do they both consider their keepsakes to be good luck but they also each physically interact with their things in unusual ways. Dobbins “liked putting his nose into the nylon and breathing in the scent of his girlfriend’s body” (117) because her scent would remind him of good memories with her. Dobbins also sleeps with the stockings which, on one hand, could be viewed as him trying to connect, sexually, to his ex-girlfriend through the stockings. On the other hand, O’Brien compares the stockings to a baby blanket, so sleeping with them may also make him feel comfortable and secure. In the reading of the stockings as a baby blanket, Dobbins seems to be reverting back to the comfort of his childhood rather than facing his current, unsafe reality.

These two meanings are very similar to Cross’s complex feelings toward Martha who he expresses both sexual and maternal love for. It seems that both characters place this duality of feeling on the women they imagine because they need them to fill the roles that are missing in their wartime reality. As there are no American women, the soldiers have no one to comfort and protect them as well as

no one to fulfill their sexual desires or to love them. Both of these roles remind them of home and their pre-war lives.

The soldiers' keepsakes do more than serve as connectors between the soldiers and their imaginary women. Because the soldiers do not seem to form or sustain true, deep relationships while at war, they often attempt to use their keepsakes to help each other better understand who they are, as these keepsakes become synonymous with their identities. It is easier for them to connect with others through the barrier of a thing rather than naturally. Only through their things can the men interact on any deeper level.

In "In the Field," which provides details of Kiowa's death and the search for his body, O'Brien explains the relationship between Kiowa and the unnamed soldier who searched for the photo of Billie. The unnamed boy, who feels guilty for Kiowa's death, remembers the scene of their last minutes together. In the scene, the boy shares the picture of Billie with Kiowa and the two talk about their home lives while intimately "huddled together under their ponchos" (170). The anonymous soldier and Kiowa are described as "close buddies, the tightest" (170). It seems that by sharing the image and exchanging stories, the two men were able to become close.

Still, while they are described as being the closest friends, it is clear that the barrier of things still leaves them at a distance since the boy still searches for his picture of Billie over Kiowa's body. This action demonstrates a definite disconnect between the boy and Kiowa as well as the boy and his own emotions because he does not mourn Kiowa's death. The unnamed soldier, like others



throughout the piece, seems to depend on things to keep deep human connectivity at a minimum for fear of the emotional distress that could result if a soldier is killed with whom they connected deeply. Thus, things protect the soldiers' psychological state, as they must deal with death on a daily basis.

Through keepsakes, like the boy's picture of his "girlfriend," soldiers are better able to talk about their home, family, and topics beyond the day-to-day war efforts and jokes that keep them emotionally distant. It is easier for the soldiers to talk about experiences they have in common, like boot camp, and to avoid serious conversations because they would naturally include discussing the upsetting topics of war and death. But by using these things, they are able to connect through serious topics while avoiding talk of war and death. Because memories and keepsakes are each soldier's identity, talking through them seems to be the only possible way to connect. Thus, keepsakes like the soldier's picture, not only offer a connection to the soldiers' pasts and home life, but also offer an opportunity for a somewhat limited connection (but a connection none-the-less) to the present and to the other men in their troop.

This story of Kiowa and the unnamed soldier's friendship takes a tragic turn. Kiowa is killed right after he "lean[ed] in for a look at the picture" (170). "“Hey, she's cute,” he'd said – and then the field exploded all around them” (170). After Kiowa's death, the boy blames himself. He believes that he caused Kiowa's death by turning on a flashlight to show him the image of his girlfriend. Because the field blew up almost instantly after he turned on the flashlight, he subconsciously decides to ease the blame on himself by blaming the death on the

flashlight. His reaction follows suit with Cross's decision to burn the pictures of Martha and Kiley's attack on the baby water buffalo: with no human enemy to blame, and so much death, the men depend on blaming things arbitrarily to ease their consciences, take out their aggression, and remain sane in the war, that as far as they were concerned, was purposeless. O'Brien explains this phenomenon best in this same story, "In The Field":

When a man died, there had to be blame. ... You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote (177).

O'Brien's theme of the swirling and blurring of definitive lines in war comes into play again as the enemy takes infinite forms: it could be the Vietnamese, the weather, God, or even themselves and their own country. In the end, it doesn't matter who the enemy is (or who is actually to blame) as long as someone or something can be blamed. Once soldiers assign blame, they can gain closure, relieve themselves of guilt, and move on with their duties. The way that O'Brien so easily drifts between things and people in this statement points back to the connection between the two and the way that they bleed into one another in war. In the end, who or what to blame seems to come down to convenience.

It is significant that the boy chooses to blame the flashlight and not the image of his "girlfriend," since sharing the image was the reason for the flashlight

to be turned on in the first place and because Kiowa's last words were about the picture. The soldier chooses to blame the flashlight rather than the image because he wants the picture to remain a positive image for him. If the picture became associated with Kiowa's death, it would ruin the image for him, and thus destroy his own identity. He would not be able to move on or come to terms with Kiowa's death because by blaming Billie, he would be blaming himself, as she is an important part of him. Blaming Billie's picture would destroy the unnamed soldier's sense of humanity as well as ruin his alternate reality of love. His only images of love (memories of Billie) would be flooded by thoughts of death and guilt.

In their book, *Treasures: The Stories Women Tell about the Things they Keep*, Kathleen Cairns and Eliane Silverman talk about the universality of keepsakes, like the unnamed soldier's photo, but focus their discussion on women instead of soldiers. The book is a study of women and their personal memorabilia. The two authors asked women from a wide range of backgrounds to show them four to six keepsakes and to talk to them about these items. In addition, each author interviewed the other about her own pieces of personal memorabilia. The two met with over one hundred women, and couldn't find one without personal keepsakes. Thus, they determined that keeping these things is part of women's collective culture: that it was not just a luxury or part of one culture or another. O'Brien acknowledges the universality of keepsakes among soldiers through the sheer volume of keepsakes he includes such as diaries, family heirlooms, photos,

letters, and charms. Every character has something beyond their guns and bullets. O'Brien even admits, "almost everyone humped photographs" (4).

In another section of *Treasures*, "Elly," one of the authors, interviews "Kathy," the other author about her personal memorabilia and the stories they tell. Here, Kathy makes a comparison between the stories of her personal memorabilia and its connection to war stories:

It isn't that I haven't sometimes told these stories. But I have never told them fully. I know that they have never been understood and that I wish they could be. But they are, I suppose, the female equivalent of old war stories, and they are as likely to impress most listeners with their tediousness as with their tragedy... so they are kept hidden in the box and in my heart, waiting for a rainy day when it is safe to take them out and remind myself again that these things happened. That I didn't dream them. They are, I think, the symbols of my survival. (50)

Like war stories, Kathy says that a main point of sharing stories about personal items is to make people understand, which is very hard to do. As the saying goes, "one man's junk is another man's treasure," and it may be hard for a person to understand the extent to which someone treasures something that could also be seen as insignificant. Kathy also points to the idea that these things' stories, like war stories, function as reminders that certain events did in fact happen, both good and bad. Similarly, the soldiers seem to view the items, especially the items of love, as pieces of evidence that remind them that they come from somewhere; that a home does exist and that they were a person before the Army – one with an identity. Until the soldiers begin depending on their keepsakes to provide an escape from the war, these pictures and letters could actually help to clear the fog of the unreality of war rather than create it.

A couple times throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien introduces a story by mentioning that he has never told it before or sometimes just not in full, just like Kathy. Both have never told these stories in full but also make it very clear that they want to be understood. Each seems to be scared to have his or her stories heard but at the same time desperately want someone to listen. By not exposing themselves, they hinder their ability to be fully understood. The other soldier characters in O'Brien's piece struggle with this fear of exposure because of the horrific things that happened in the war and because they fear coming off as cowardly. Even amongst themselves, the men turn tragedies into jokes in order to avoid serious and emotional conversation. Additionally, because of their wartime experiences, the soldiers fear that no woman at home could ever understand them.

The fact that *Treasures*, a book about women, has such a strong connection to *The Things They Carried*, a book about male soldiers demonstrates the universality of the importance of personal memorabilia. But beyond this, the connection seems to point to a feminine side of the soldiers, one that seeks comfort in these items – things often of love but always of intense meaning and feeling – to ease the coldness, emptiness, and loneliness they feel as soldiers. These things allow the soldiers an outlet through which to express emotions that they must repress in order to stay strong (mentally) as a soldier.

Another work, Susan Stabile's *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America*, places many of the same assertions of *Treasures* in a broader, historical context. The piece looks at female memory through objects in 18<sup>th</sup>-century America. The two pieces together

provide a more complete analysis of women's relationship with keepsakes then and now and offer a female perspective on the role of keepsakes. Both pieces establish that keeping things, historically, has been within the realm of women. *Memory's Daughters* discusses how men were more focused on public memory and archives and women, more on domestic memory, on genealogy, and, in general, on personal memory. Within this distinction, the men in O'Brien's piece seem to fit better into the category of women, with a strong focus on their own personal memory. The amount of letters, photographs, and other memorabilia that the soldiers cling to highly outweighs any sort of objects of public memory, which appear to be absent in O'Brien's piece. The intense sentimental value the soldiers ascribe to many of their possessions also points to their fixation with personal memory. This shift seems to occur as the men must take over the roles of American women who are absent in Vietnam. Whereas their mothers, girlfriends, and/or wives may have collected personal memorabilia at home, the men are left to do this on their own. One main way that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century women of Stabile's study came to understand the value of personal memorabilia was through their loss of identity as their identity was essentially erased and replaced by their husband's identity when they were married. Personal memorabilia helped to fill in elements of their lost identities. In the same way, the soldiers come to understand the importance of personal memorabilia as a means of keeping their identities when they are essentially stripped of their individuality by the Army's rules and culture. The abrupt change in the male soldiers' values and relationship with their

things separates them further from their past lives and adds to their feeling of being psychologically lost in the war.

The value the soldiers assign their things is most clearly illustrated by how and where the soldiers carry them. In *Treasures*, Cairns and Silverman explain that many of the women they visited had memory boxes or kept their treasured items in special places. In the case of the anonymous boy, he keeps his treasured picture of Billie in a plastic bag. In wartime, keeping items in plastic bags is meant to preserve the item and to guard it from damaging elements of the outside world. Therefore, for the soldiers, keeping something in a plastic bag is keeping it in a special place.

This practice of protecting sentimental things with plastic is common. At the beginning of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien mentions, "they were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack" (1). It seems that Cross wanted to preserve the letters because he wanted to keep them until they magically became what he hoped for: love letters. By preserving the letters, Cross could also protect Martha from the hardships of the war. He could control the safety of the letters and thus the security of Martha and her memories even when he could not always keep his own men secure. The plastic also functions as a separator between love (the letters and Martha) and war (everything outside of the plastic). He seems to want to keep the contents pure and unaffected by the gritty war, especially because it seems that love and war blend so effortlessly into one another in the chaos of war.

Plastic bags are an attempt at stopping this and at creating some definite lines – to replace the shades of gray – between different things, concepts, and emotions.

Later in O'Brien's book, the soldiers' prepare Kiowa's body to be picked up in a dustoff. After cleaning him off a little, "Rat Kiley went through the kid's pockets, placed his personal effects in a plastic bag, taped the bag to Kiowa's wrist, then used the radio to call in a dustoff" (175). Kiowa was well liked and respected among the other soldiers, so men took the time to help preserve Kiowa's things. In doing so, they are preserving all that remains of his identity and personality.

This practice's universality continues today in the war in Iraq. In a 2006 *Grand Rapid Press* story about the military's Joint Personal Effects Depot, which houses the personal items of injured or deceased soldiers, the author lists things that have been sent in from Iraq and Afghanistan that once belonged to (now deceased) soldiers: "There are piles of brown T-shirts and socks, a jumble of sneakers and boots, a plastic bag filled with handwritten letters. A knife. A stack of video games." The author does not mention that any of the items except for the letters were kept in any sort of protective box or covering. Thus, even though they are only in a plastic bag, the soldier seemed to have cared more for the letters and went out of his way to protect these things of love more than any other thing.

Things like Jimmy Cross's pebble and Henry Dobbins's stockings are also given importance based on how they are carried. Both items are carried very close to their owner rather than inside their rucksack. Cross carries the pebble in his mouth and Dobbins carries the stockings around his neck and often over his



mouth and nose. Both protect their items by not letting them out of their sight. By essentially “wearing” these items, they can constantly feel their presence on their bodies and be reminded of their meanings to them as they travel. Dobbins’s stockings become so intertwined with his identity that they almost become part of his physical self, as he displays them on his body for all to see. Without the stockings on top of his military uniform, he would look like everyone else and, in the same way, without the memories the stockings represent for him, he would be the same as everyone else. Without the stockings, he would lose the memories that define him as an individual. He also seems to display the stockings out of pride that a woman gave them to him and out of pride for discovering their “magic powers” which the other men seem to believe in as well. Dobbins feels comfortable displaying the stockings because he knows that the other men believe in their powers and therefore he understands that he need not be embarrassed. Cross, on the other hand, does not flaunt his items from Martha (keeping the pebble hidden in his mouth and the letters at the bottom of his rucksack) because he is already ashamed of his relationship with them, even without comment from the other men. He believes that they played a role in his inappropriate behavior and in actions of which he is not proud. The soldiers are extremely careful with and protective of their keepsakes because caring for these things is easier than caring for themselves in the war. By taking care of these things that are so connected to their identities, the soldiers preserve their sense of self-worth as much as possible. By taking such good care of keepsakes, the soldiers ensure their long-term existence and their continued ability to find a sense of hope, escape,

and love in these things. By carrying keepsakes, the soldiers demonstrate a subconscious understanding that they deserve a break, an escape, happiness, and love. Still, the burdens of the soldiers' powerful relationships with their keepsakes greatly limit the benefits of these deep connections.

### *SUPPLIES*

Just as the soldiers edit and re-imagine the memories that their keepsakes represent, the soldier characters redefine the meaning of many of their supplies, often to allow them to better fit the soldiers' actual needs and desires in war. The soldiers use M&M's candies, a Bible, and a smoke grenade in ways very different from their original and intended uses which reflects changes in their values due to the stress of the war. This "transitional thing" is first demonstrated through Rat Kiley, the group's medic, carrying "M&M's for especially bad wounds" (5). Here, candies – traditionally eaten for enjoyment and reminiscent of childhood – are used as placebo pills to help dying men feel better temporarily. The M&M's allow the soldiers to care for one another even after there is nothing more they can actually do to help. The M&M's may actually help alleviate the soldiers' helplessness but are also closely associated with death and dying. While the M&M's are still consumed, they are swallowed in this case rather than chewed and enjoyed. While the actual physical M&M's have not changed, the human enjoyment typically connected with them has been removed and replaced by medicinal coldness.

The soldiers must redefine the meaning of the M&M's out of necessity. In war, they must rearrange their values and personal pleasure (enjoyment of candy) must rank very low on the soldiers' lists. This drastic change in meaning and use of M&M's (from an enjoyment in life to an instrument meshed with death), touches upon the fine lines O'Brien attempts to paint. Throughout O'Brien's piece, he contends that in war, opposite things and concepts blend into each other. The M&M's serve as an example of this foggy gray area in war, where one thing can so easily become its opposite through its connection to a person (or people). O'Brien expresses this idea best in terms of war: "War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead" (80). Here, O'Brien discusses the nature of war as well as its effect on soldiers. War itself, as O'Brien explains it, is a combination of opposite experiences, which all blur together into the idea that war, at its very essence, contains every experience to a degree. Not only is war made up of blurred experiences, but war, through these blended experiences, also causes everything involved in and affected by it to blur as well.

Soon after O'Brien exposes the new meaning of the troop's M&M's, Kiowa uses his New Testament Bible – a gift from his father and thus actually a wartime keepsake for him – as a pillow: "he opened his New Testament and arranged it beneath his head as a pillow" (18). In this instance, a thing of great meaning for Kiowa based on its status as a family gift and its importance to his religion is reduced to a cloth bag of feathers. Here, another shift in values, caused by the war, occurs. For Kiowa who is regarded as one of the most respected

characters, religion and family become less important than comfort and a good night of sleep.

Later in the book, two soldiers, Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon, decide to play catch with smoke grenades. Here, the soldiers are using things of war to play a youthful game for entertainment. The men were “giggling and calling each other yellow mother and playing a silly game they’d invented” (69). The two men sound like young boys, teasing each other and laughing. They seem to have momentarily forgotten about the war by removing the death and war from the meaning of this specific thing. Like Kiowa’s Bible, this thing of war, is reduced (to a ball for instance).

Further, it is through this ball/grenade and the familiarity with the childhood game of catch that the characters are capable of interacting with each other, free of inhibitions, as the soldiers forget about the stresses of war, their fear of being cowardly, and their tough exterior. The soldiers must act as brave men, but through their tears and longings throughout the book, O’Brien exposes their youth and a certain type of innocence at their core. Their use of the grenade allows their imaginations and childhood playfulness to come out for one of the first times in the book: “They were kids,” O’Brien explains. Kiley and Lemon saw their trip up into the mountains as “a nature hike ... not even a war,” O’Brien continues (69).

Ironically, it is during this release of playfulness, that Curt Lemon is killed. O’Brien introduces Kiley and Lemon’s game of catch by stating, “the game involved smoke grenades, which were harmless unless you did stupid

things, and what they did was pull out the pin and stand a few feet apart and play catch under the shade of those huge trees” (70). While the first part foreshadows what is to come for Lemon, the second part (“play catch under the shade of those huge trees”) sounds wholesome and would never be considered dangerous in civilian life. It is only once the thing of war (the grenade) is thrown into the mix, that the casual game of catch takes on a much darker tone. The fact that of all of the things to play catch with, the boys choose a grenade, as well as the fact that they purposefully pull out the grenade’s pin, demonstrates their desire to create thrill and risk and that there is more involved in Kiley and Lemon’s interaction than just a desire for boyhood fun. The soldiers seem to be affected by the chaos and fog of war to the point that their idea to play catch with a weapon seems normal and fully acceptable. Because so many war experiences already go against human nature (such as facing death on a daily basis and killing without purpose or cause), soldiers lose their sense of what is natural, normal, and reasonable. These two men in particular fail to use common sense as they would have before the war and think nothing of their decision to play catch with a weapon. After seeing many of their fellow soldiers die by randomly stepping on landmines, luck seems to have replaced sense for the soldiers. Good luck charms are so common amongst the soldiers because the soldiers find them to be more valuable than their protective war equipment or even mine detectors. Common sense becomes a somewhat obsolete concept in the war because every aspect of the war lacks sense to the soldiers in the first place. They can not make sense of their purpose as soldiers, the purpose of the war, or the purpose of so much death.

All of these “transitional things” take on meanings as well as uses that are almost opposites of their original intended purposes while not changing whatsoever in physical form. This idea seems to point back to O’Brien’s description of war as a mixture of contradictory truths. A grenade can be a grenade at the same time that it is a ball; a Bible can be a family heirloom, a religious text, and a pillow all at once. O’Brien explains that for the average soldier, “Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true.” (82). This statement relates back to O’Brien’s central theme of the blurring of things. Through the constant repetition of this concept, he portrays the gray areas between things and concepts as the norm. As nothing is definitively defined, the soldiers are able to control their things, taking them out of the gray area and redefining their meaning as they wish.

The changes in meanings of these things point to the idea that things can function in a unique ways in war and that meaning is not always automatically assigned to a specific item based on what it is physically. The soldiers seem to make these adaptations with unusual frequency because of wartime conditions.

#### **HUMAN THINGS:**

##### *BODIES*

Because of the same wartime conditions discussed above, soldiers treat people/bodies differently than can be expected in civilian life. The soldiers

objectify the only American woman character in Vietnam because, in part, they are so used to their things representing women at home (as discussed in “Keepsakes” above) and are unfamiliar with how to treat women in a war setting. The soldiers also personify and objectify dead bodies in order to avoid dealing with death. Their objectification and personification blurs the line between human and thing and adds to O’Brien’s theme of the overarching ambiguities of war for the soldiers.

Jennifer M. Saul comments on objectification and personification in her essay, “On Treating Things as People: Objectification, Pornography, and the History of the Vibrator.” Saul defines objectification broadly as “treating people in a way that is appropriate for objects (and inappropriate for people)” (46). She goes on to explain one of the most definitive types of objectification, which she calls “instrumentalizing” (47). “Instrumentalizing,” according to Saul, is when a person treats something solely as a means to his/her own ends, using it without regard for that something’s ends. If that something is an object, this relationship is perfectly acceptable: “there is nothing wrong with using a hammer without a thought for the hammer’s own ends, as hammers don’t have ends” (47). Saul continues that this relationship does not seem appropriate when the something is another person, as that person does have his/her own ends to worry about. This relationship is most commonly discussed in terms of men objectifying women (this is also the way Saul discusses objectification).

Saul goes on to define personification, most generally, as treating things as people but within that, she makes the distinction between “attribut[ing] human

qualities—in particular, mental states—to a thing” and “engag[ing] in behavior with or toward things that is normally only engaged in with or toward people” (47). This later definition best relates to the soldiers’ treatment of dead bodies and other things as the treatment is much more about the soldier and his relationship to the thing than about the thing itself. In *The Things They Carried*, the soldiers frequently use forms of personification as a coping method, just as the unnamed soldier tried to ease his own guilt by blaming Kiowa’s death on a flashlight.

The character, Mary Anne Bell is objectified and at times, instrumentalized, by her boyfriend (Mark Fossie) and the other soldiers when she first arrives in Vietnam to visit. Fossie’s and the other soldiers’ treatment of Mary Anne, before she transforms into an intense fighter, serves as the primary example of objectification of women in *The Things They Carried*. Mary Anne first enters the story as the sweet young girlfriend of Fossie. She comes to visit Fossie in Vietnam. When she first arrives in Vietnam, she functions as a thing to the soldiers. Rat Kiley tells the anecdote, a story of his past with another company, for the soldiers in Alpha Company. After listening to the story, Mitchell Sanders responds, “Nobody ships his honey over to Nam. It don’t ring true. I mean, you just can’t import your own personal poontang” (90). Sanders’s response to Rat’s story demonstrates that he views Mary Anne as only a means to her boyfriend’s ends and thus as only an instrument. In other words, she is only “poontang” or used for sex.

Sanders also, like many soldiers, automatically viewed her coming to Vietnam as part of a transaction: she was the import to be personally used by her



boyfriend. Rat furthers this idea of Mary Anne's arrival in Vietnam as part of a transaction in his response to Sanders: "Listen, the guy sends her the money. Flies her over. This cute blonde – just a kid, just barely out of high school – she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags" (90). Here, Rat describes Fossie as almost buying her; he sends money and she magically arrives. This passage simplifies the process to a simple exchange: money for woman and does not explain anything Mary Anne had to go through to come to Vietnam.

In the story Rat goes on to tell, Mary Anne arrives in a helicopter that also carries the daily supply shipment. He also describes her as having "a complexion like strawberry ice cream" (93). In both of these moments, Mary Anne is associated, either directly or indirectly, with being a thing (whether she is described in terms of food or travels among other things, like food).

One explanation of the soldiers' behavior towards Mary Anne is that the soldiers are so disconnected from her (and women in general) and the world at home that they cannot even think of her as fully human, just as with distance, Cross could only view Martha as super-human. While in the field, the soldiers' only connections to women at home are through letters and pictures. The best way they know how to treat a real woman within the war setting is the same way they treat the letters and pictures: as things.

Because a real civilian woman in Vietnam was so unusual, and almost unreal, the soldiers were both fascinated by and taken aback by Mary Anne. When she first arrived, "for a long while the men were quiet" (94). And even after the initial shock was gone, the soldiers were still fascinated by Mary Anne's

clothing and were generally amused by her: “Out on the volleyball court she wore cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated, and in the evenings she liked to dance to music from Rat’s portable tape deck. There was a novelty to it; she was good for morale” (95). Here, in addition to establishing a feeling of disconnection from Mary Anne as a person, O’Brien portrays Mary Anne as having the sole purpose of gratifying the soldiers’ ends by entertaining them and being sexually attractive to them.

Rita Felski’s 2007 article, “Object Relations,” offers an overview of current discussions about things and objects and how the different methods of analysis relate to each other. In this short piece, Felski mentions the relationship between feminism and “thing theory.” This short section of her piece explains the repercussions of women, like the character Mary Anne, being objectified throughout history. Her work, in part, deals with what Felski calls “feminist thing theory.” Felski comments that “feminist thing theory” is underdeveloped and is more complicated than “thing theory” is for men because, like Saul, “feminist thing theorists” believe that women are most often objectified by men. “Feminist thing theorists” therefore do not have a positive view of things; according to Felski, “objects were decried as dangerous, even lethal, sources of distraction, channeling female energies into the fruitless labor of buying, tending, using, cleaning, and organizing stuff.” Women associate the emotional toll their objectification by men has taken on them with things. This added element creates a gap between man and thing and woman and thing.

This gap is widened as Felski explains that women, traditionally, are in charge of the objects of the domestic sphere, such as the dishes, complicating women's relationship with things even more. Brown also mentions the connection between people and domestic things in *A Sense of Things*. He discusses these things in terms of Mark Twain and his wife's lives and how their things were "of fascination and repulsion, modes of self-definition and self-obliteration, sources of safety and threat" (24). These dichotomies occurred as a result of the sheer amount of things that people began to own in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century because of new means of production. With these new things, came more housework, especially for the wives, to take care of all of the things that accumulate. Brown explains these things as "tyrannical," thus exhibiting power and control over their owners and women as being slaves to house-keeping. While the immensity of things that Twain and his wife had took over their lives, Twain could also define his success and thus self-worth by this same immensity of things. Therefore, when his book sales dropped and he was not doing as well financially, "he came to mourn the loss of the 'objects without number'" (24). While Brown explains men's relationship with things of the domestic sphere as involving reassurance of their self-worth (as the traditional breadwinner), a positive connection, Brown primarily discusses things in relation to women in terms of enslaving them in housework, a negative connection.

Women's tainted relationship with things may have been more acute in Twain's time, but Mary Anne's post-transformation reaction to her things connected to the culture of the American woman seems to be an extension of

women's relationships with things as discussed by Felski and Brown. Once Mary Anne begins to transform from a high-school girl into a hardcore militant, she must shed the things that tie her to being a woman. She sheds the things that had been inhibiting: "no cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandana" (98). In this moment, she rids herself of the things of her past of objectification. As she transforms into her Greenie<sup>4</sup> alter ego – she becomes a character with more than one dimension.

While the men objectify Mary Anne just as Saul defines it, the soldiers' objectification of dead bodies is less common and more complicated even though both interactions involve the soldiers' relationship with a human form. The soldiers both objectify and personify dead bodies as, in O'Brien's work, they fall somewhere in between the two treatments. The treatment of bodies differs from the treatment of a living person, such as Mary Anne in that the soldiers have greater control of their interactions with dead bodies than they do with a living person (as evidenced by Mary Anne's transition into a Greenie and their inability to keep her objectified). The soldiers' emotional reaction to dead bodies differs from their reaction to Mary Anne as well. In certain ways, the soldiers can better relate to the dead bodies they encounter than to Mary Anne because they have seen so many of their fellow soldiers die and they themselves could be killed at any point in their dangerous wartime reality. They have also become greatly desensitized to the dead bodies. Mary Anne seems to be from a different world

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<sup>4</sup> By "Greenie" or "the Greenies" O'Brien refers to the Green Berets, a special operations group in the military. O'Brien portrays the Greenies as a hardcore and somewhat elitist group of fighters who separate themselves from the rest of the soldiers.

with her civilian clothes, her femininity, and the ability to leave the war for home whenever she pleases. Thus, the soldiers often seem to objectify dead bodies in order to make them less scary and upsetting but also personify them because they feel a connection to them.

Objectification and personification come into play in relation to a dead body, in O'Brien's final chapter, "The Lives of the Dead." On O'Brien's fourth day at war, the men come across an old man who was killed in an air strike (ordered by Jimmy Cross). The soldiers (with the exception of a scared O'Brien) speak to him/it, shake his/its hand, and eventually sit him/it up, cross his/it legs, give him/it food, and toast to him/it. The body seems to fall right in between the categories of thing and person/body. While the body was a person, it is almost treated like a doll by the soldiers. They feed it and talk to it as if they are having a tea party with it. In this way, it seems that the soldiers are objectifying the body.

On the other hand, the body is inanimate and they are treating him like an animate person, thus personifying the body: "'Be polite now,' he [Dave Jensen] said. 'Go introduce yourself. Nothing to be afraid about, just a nice old man. Show a little respect for your elders'" (226). Here, Dave Jensen speaks of the corpse as if the corpse would be offended if O'Brien were rude to him. He and the other soldiers treat the corpse in the same way they would treat a human and in an inappropriate way to typically treat an object. Even the title of this short story at the end of the book, "The Lives of the Dead," makes a claim that even the dead – the inanimate, the things – have lives and hints at the blurry line O'Brien creates

between dead and living, and between personification and objectification (and more simply between person and thing).

A similar mixture of personification and objectification comes into play when O'Brien analyzes the man he killed in "The Man I Killed." O'Brien focuses in on specific parts of the man, in particular, the "star-shaped hole" (126) where his eye used to be. He mentions the eye six different times within the seven-page story. Through O'Brien's focus on the hole, the man is essentially reduced to this hole. And as the story continues and O'Brien creates a life story for the man, the man truly begins to be solely a hole – an empty vessel – that O'Brien fills in with his own projections of what the man may have been like.

O'Brien's projections sound a lot like O'Brien himself. O'Brien tries to identify with the man he killed. O'Brien projects that the dead man was a scholar that could not have possibly wanted to come to war, exactly like his own situation. O'Brien was also a scholar, who was against coming to the war but felt pressure from his society to become a soldier as explained in "On the Rainy River." Later in the book, O'Brien describes a scene from grade school when he is not able to stand up to a classmate, Nick, or to save Linda, his childhood girlfriend, from embarrassment. He projects that the Vietnamese man had been teased in school when he was young, and, like himself, could not find the courage to stand up to the other boys.

By personifying the dead body, O'Brien longs for a human interaction with the enemy. He longs to understand him as a person and therefore thinks of him in terms of what he can best understand: his own life experiences. O'Brien's

unusually great interest in the dead man evokes the sense that O'Brien feels guilty for killing the man but also feels a connection to and a curiosity about the dead man. This man becomes the face of the enemy to O'Brien because the soldiers do not often see or interact with the Vietcong, let alone come face-to-face with one. When O'Brien does come face-to-face with this man he killed, he does not seem so much like an enemy, because he is already dead and no longer a threat. He also understands that he could have easily been in the dead man's position had he hesitated in killing him, as the man had a weapon. By imagining the man to be similar to himself, he may be empathizing with the man and trying grasp how close he was to this man's fate.

### *TOKENS*

Another form of objectification that occurs frequently in *The Things They Carried*, is characters' use of body parts as souvenirs, jewelry, or good luck charms. This form differs from the objectification of bodies – dead and alive – because body parts are often completely redefined and reinvented at the will of the soldiers, just as the soldiers alter the uses of M&M's or the smoke grenade. Body parts differ from these items as they are still parts of human beings and carry a grotesque quality for a reader. The soldiers use these things as if they are no different from their supplies or other material possessions, signaling a break with normalcy caused by the lack of sense or normal behavior in war as well as the desensitization of the soldiers to the dead.

Both Mitchell Sanders and Norman Bowker objectify a human thumb that Sanders cut off the hand of a VC corpse. More accurately, they turn this body part into a material possession which Bowker carries around for good luck. Sanders gives the thumb to Bowker as a gift. To hold on to a severed thumb alone already objectifies the human body, but to give it as a gift to another person who willingly accepts it, seems to take it one step further as an object. This gift giving seems to have this elevating effect because it demonstrates that keeping human thumbs was so acceptable among the group, that it was okay to give it as a gift and to receive it as a legitimate present. Lewis Hyde offers some insight on gifts, both physical and mental, in his book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. Amid his discussion of art as a gift and the history of gifts, he discusses the power of gift giving. He concludes that a thing earns value by its status as a gift: “the gift becomes an agent of social cohesion, and this again leads to the feeling that its passage increases its worth, for in social life, at least, the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts” (45). Thus, Hyde views important human interactions emerging through a thing, a gift. Sanders and Bowker are bonded together through this strange gift of a human thumb. While the thing, the gift, facilitates human interaction, the thing itself emerges as more powerful and meaningful to the men involved. The gift represents a wartime friendship but not an intimate friendship. The gift of the thumb functions similarly to the soldiers using humor to hide emotion. Sanders erases the emotion, gruesomeness, and death from the thumb by removing it from the body and giving it as a gift. Bowker’s acceptance of it establishes his complacency with keeping their relationship at this surface



level and acceptance of experiencing the war together at this level. The thumb itself, which they choose to understand as a good luck charm rather than a disgusting war souvenir, represents their wartime relationship, which consists of playing chess and making jokes, but avoids any inconvenient or upsetting truths. The thumb comes to represent this empty wartime friendship in addition to good luck and war.

O'Brien introduces this thing of superstition right after he mentions that Dave Jensen carries a rabbit's foot (13). O'Brien seems to do this to compare the two and to express that to these soldiers, there was not much of a difference between a rabbit's foot and a human thumb: both are things used for good luck. The soldiers are so desensitized to death and bodies, especially Vietnamese bodies, that the fact that the thumb is human has no affect on the men. This connection between the thumb and the rabbit's foot furthers O'Brien's constant assertion that things flow into each other and that lines differentiating humans from things are temporary and situational, but are not written in stone. As O'Brien explains, "right spills over into wrong" (82). While a rabbit's foot may be considered "right" and acceptable in civilian society and a human thumb may be considered "wrong" and disgusting, in war, they really become one and the same.

Like many keepsakes that were carried in plastic for safekeeping, Sanders wraps the thumb in toilet paper for protection. He does this just as someone might wrap up a lock of hair in tissue. Thus, Sanders essentially treats the thumb, a thing of war as a keepsake, a thing of love, thus again, continuing O'Brien's pattern of constantly blurring setlines.

Another example of body-parts-turned-material-possessions occurs in “Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong.” In this section, Rat states that, after her transformation, Mary Anne wore “a necklace of human tongues” (110). A necklace is typically a symbol of femininity and is worn either for its beauty or for a sentimental purpose. But stringing together pieces of someone else’s body seems brutal and savage and not feminine or sentimental at all. Mary Anne, who was previously objectified by the soldiers, turns to objectifying the tongues (or more accurately turns the body part into a material possession) in order to take out her emotions and anger on them. Like Rat Kiley and his murder of the baby water buffalo, Mary Anne creates more pain and destruction when experiencing pain herself. She puts together the grotesque necklace as a reaction to her objectification by Fossie and the other soldiers as well as to counter her unfulfilling life in the U.S.

In this reading of Mary Anne’s necklace, it is important that Mary Anne’s necklace is made of tongues specifically. By leaving Fossie and fighting in Vietnam, Mary Anne gains a voice, represented by the tongues that she lacked as a civilian. In the chaos of war, Mary Anne is not expected to act in any specific stereotypical role of women. She finally feels free and alive. Marilyn Wesley supports this point and takes it a step further in her analysis, “Truth and Fiction in Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*,” She suggests that, “‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ posits a kind of falseness of national experience, especially true of feminine socialization, that accounts for the addictive appeal of the existential authenticity encountered in the danger and

physical extremes imposed by war” (12). Here, Wesley explains that Mary Anne gets caught up in the Vietnam War experience because she senses that she has been sheltered and trapped in the confines of American society – in part because she is female. The excitement and unpredictability of war frees her from these confines. Wesley argues that the war not only frees Mary Anne from her role as a woman, but it frees her from the superficial values of American society which she previously subscribed to – as her biggest goals in life consisted of marrying Fossie and having a house on Lake Erie. With this freedom and newfound sense of power and excitement, she has no real need for her boyfriend, Fossie. Being with Mark only constrained her to the American societal role of a girlfriend. Thus, Mary Anne’s act of aggression and brutality in the creation of her tongue necklace was less aimed at the Vietnamese “enemies” and instead at American society and the men in her life. This thing, then, furthers the ambiguity surrounding who the real enemy is.

Bowker’s human thumb and Mary Anne’s necklace of human tongues tread the line between body part and material possession. Both point to one of Brown’s ideas, that “the body is a thing among things” and that, in the confusion of war, something can be both part of a body and a material possession at once (4).

#### *DESCRIPTIONS*

O'Brien objectifies characters through more or less figurative descriptions. O'Brien describes the characters, O'Brien and Mary Anne, in terms of land and war. Through his description, both become more than soldiers, they embody the war and Vietnam. O'Brien describes it, "I was the land itself ... I was Nam – the horror, the war" (209). Mary Anne is described similarly: "she was part of the land" (116). They each have the experience of becoming one with the war and with Vietnam and thus equals with inanimate things. Both characters come to need the excitement that results from war – and in fact, obsess over it. In O'Brien's case, he longs for the excitement of war after he is shot, confined to a bed, and sent to a post on the outskirts – relatively distant from combat – to heal. This desire for war is amplified when his old company visits his post and he feels left out of the group. O'Brien held a grudge against his old company's medic, Jorgenson, who replaced Rat Kiley. Jorgenson had accidentally mistreated O'Brien's gunshot wound because he was new to the field and froze up. In order to experience the thrill of war again, O'Brien wages war on the apologetic medic by carrying out a complex plot to scare Jorgenson one night while he is on guard. In this moment, O'Brien comes across as pathetic, crazed, and evil. Azar, one of the soldiers from his old company, calls him out on his craving of war which he describes as "pitiful" (212). Azar says, "You dig playing war, right? That's all this *is*." (212). At this point, O'Brien has made a transformation of his own (similar to Mary Anne's), from a kid who considered moving to Canada to get out of going to war to a soldier desperate for combat.

Mary Anne comes to be considered part of the land when she leaves her civilian life and runs off to be a militant with the Greenies. It is only when they form this relationship with the war and with Vietnam that O'Brien describes them as part of the land. Of all things to be connected to, they are associated with the land, the most dangerous and unpredictable element of the war for the soldiers. The land is the closest thing to an enemy that the soldiers experience, and yet, they are the land. At this point, the two characters are not only confused as to who the real enemy is, but they themselves are in certain respects, their own enemies.

O'Brien also continues to comment on the blurring between things and people through the figurative description of Ted Lavender in terms of things when he is killed in "The Things They Carried." The narrator describes his body as "dead weight" and later Kiowa explains, "it was like watching a rock fall, or a big sandbag or something...the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom-down, he said. Like cement" (6-7). Kiowa does not differentiate between the weight of Lavender's belongings and the weight of his body. In this statement, everything he carries, including his body, together form the rock, or sandbag that became Ted Lavender. By explaining, Ted Lavender – a man – as weighty himself, O'Brien points to the fact that people are amongst things but are also, in many ways, things themselves. People and things become inextricably conjoined in this moment, and really throughout the text. People depend on things, cherish things, form relationships with things, change things, control things, lose control of things, are burdened by things, and even become things.

The connection between things and people or bodies is not just of people owning or in this case, carrying things. Instead, it is more fuzzy and complex. By treating bodies, people, and body parts as things, as O'Brien's characters often do, they equate and connect bodies and things. As the soldiers increasingly view bodies and things as connected, the lines begin to blur between human and thing. Beyond this, as the soldiers become more and more desensitized to dead bodies and body parts, they become more and more like things or dead bodies as they lack human emotion as a result of their experiences in the war.

#### **LACK OF HUMAN INTERACTION:**

While O'Brien fixes much of his short stories around the soldiers' interactions with their things, he also makes a point to illustrate the soldiers' limited true human interaction in war. There is so much focus on the inanimate and the relationships between people and things, but there is much less evidence of direct interactions between human beings other than the day-to-day interactions between the soldiers in Cross's company. Not only is there less evidence of direct human interaction, but there is also plentiful evidence that the soldiers are unfulfilled because of their lack of human interaction in the war and therefore constantly yearn for people to love them, listen to them without judgment, and understand them, including their war experience.

Only two direct, person-to-person relationships stand out in *The Things They Carried* as significant and real. Each occurs between O'Brien and an other

and before O'Brien goes to war. The first instance occurs between O'Brien and Elroy Berdahl, the innkeeper at a bed and breakfast on the Canadian border, when O'Brien contemplates dodging the draft. He spends a lot of time with the innkeeper and the men form a quiet bond. Even without many words, the man has a strong influence on O'Brien and O'Brien feels as though the man truly understands what he is going through. Their time together prompts O'Brien to stay in the States and face his fate of going to Vietnam.

While this relationship was not long lasting, O'Brien constantly acknowledges the importance of the interaction they had and thus the importance of this man to him in "On the Rainy River." He thanks and praises this man more than anyone else in the book and provides more details of their short relationship than he does of his relationship with his daughter, for example, or with any specific soldier in his company. Throughout the short story, O'Brien makes remarks about how he felt as though Elroy understood what he was going through even though he never told him. O'Brien mentions, "I think, the man understood that words were insufficient," then, "some of this Elroy must've understood," and later, "the man knew" (51, 52, 54).

O'Brien explains,

"He didn't speak. He was simply there, like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real. He was the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them" (60).

While this is one of the deepest and most highly developed human interactions in the book, O'Brien still takes Elroy out of the realm of human by

comparing him to a god, as if he thinks a human interaction this real cannot exist or he just places Elroy on such a high pedestal because no one else in his life treated him like this. Either way, the closeness O'Brien experiences with Elroy in this early chapter is unmatched by any interactions between the soldiers in subsequent chapters.

Not until the last chapter, "The Lives of the Dead," does another "real" relationship, as O'Brien describes it, appear. The relationship between Timmy (a younger O'Brien) and Linda, his childhood girlfriend, was similarly short-lived but incredibly intense. When he first introduces their relationship, O'Brien states, "Linda was nine then, as I was, but we were in love. And it was real... I know for a fact that what we felt for each other was as deep and rich as love can ever get" (228). While Cross has a deep and intense love for Martha, he does so with the knowledge that their love is based on his imagination, thus differentiating it from O'Brien and Linda's. Later, O'Brien explains, "Neither of us, I suppose, would've thought to use that word, love, but by the fact of not looking at each other, and not talking, we understood with a clarity beyond language that we were sharing something huge and permanent" (230). In this statement, O'Brien expresses a similar emotional bond with Linda as he does with Elroy, one that is beyond speech. O'Brien describes both of these relationships as being "real." Amongst the rest of the stories which toy with the ideas of truth, fiction, and unreality, O'Brien's assertion that they were real takes on a significant weight.

By including these two relationships that O'Brien revels in and is extremely emotional about, he offers a means for comparison with wartime



relationships. Whereas both of these relationships are defined by knowing silences, the soldiers' relationships with each other, for example, are defined by pointless banter, only skimming the surface of anything meaningful. Similarly, the soldiers easily flip flop between friends and enemies whereas O'Brien's two significant relationships remain positive, even in memory. The wartime relationships that come closest to these two intense human relationships are the soldiers' relationships with their things or through their things; no other human interaction comes close in level of intensity or understanding. The soldiers' relationships with their things are incredibly intense as the soldiers use their things as an outlet for their emotions – both good and bad – but usually very strong. The soldiers depend on their things to essentially hold their hopes, fears, embarrassments, and desires. Whenever the soldiers are afraid to share an emotion with their fellow soldiers, they gain support from their things. Still, just because they temporarily depend on their things as emotional outlets, the men are not content with only these relationships and crave real relationships like those O'Brien had with Elroy and Linda. Thus, it seems that through the use of these two relationships, O'Brien includes a standard of deep connection between people that the soldiers all long for. The relationships between people and their things are more developed than between soldiers in the war, but they still never reach the level of O'Brien's pre-war interactions.

While most of the soldiers get along throughout the book, their relationship rarely breaches the surface which is surprising because the young men must deal with death and hardship so often. The soldiers keep up this surface

relationship through making jokes and lightening the mood. In one early moment after Ted Lavender's death, the men pass around "a joint" (interacting through a thing) and O'Brien explains, "scary stuff, one of them might say. But then someone else would grin or flick his eyebrows and say, Roger-dodger, almost cut me a new asshole, *almost*" (20). Here, someone tries to connect with the other soldiers on a serious subject but another soldier cuts this off by using humor to instantly lighten the mood and change the conversation. The soldiers hold each other at such a distance because they are afraid to admit their fears to each other: "they were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it" for none of them wanted to seem cowardly (20). They also avoid talking about death by using terms such as, "*greased...offed, lit up, [and] zapped while zipping*" (20). These words distance them from death and dehumanize the deceased person.

The soldiers' treatment of bodies and body parts, as I describe earlier, similarly functions to make the dead less real and thus less scary. The avoidance of death and of dealing with death actually end up weighing on the soldiers on top of all of the weight of their things. Without the willingness to talk or to listen, the soldiers must carry this "common secret of cowardice" that they all share (21). It is at this point of disconnection that the soldiers turn to their things to express built-up emotion.

In "Speaking of Courage," which takes place after the war, O'Brien demonstrates the intensity with which the soldiers desire to be listened to and to be understood. In it, Norman Bowker, one of the soldiers who was part of Cross's company imagines that people are willing to listen to him about his war

experience once he returns home. First, Bowker imagines talking to Sally, a woman whose picture he carried around in the war, and showing off some random skills he learned in the war. Then, Bowker's imaginary scenario turns to a conversation with his father in which his father wants to know what happened to him in Vietnam: "'so tell me,' his father would have said. ... 'You really want to hear this?' 'Hey, I'm your *father*'" (142). At this, "Norman Bowker smiled. He looked out across the lake and imagined the feel of his tongue against the truth" (142). Here, he creates this imaginary scenario because he craves it so strongly. He wants to talk about the horrible realities of war that he experienced and be fully understood by the important people in his life, like his father. He seems to feel a sense of relief and release even when just imagining this scenario. The inclusion of the word "tongue" in this statement relates back to Cross carrying the pebble from Martha in his mouth, and caressing it with his tongue and also to Mary Anne's necklace of human tongues. The tongue, in this book, seems to symbolize expression. Cross expresses his lust and longing for Martha by playing with the pebble with his tongue. Similarly, Mary Anne wears the necklace of human tongues when she has regained a voice (after her transformation) and feels free to express herself in ways she never could before. In Bowker's case, within this fantasy, he finally feels free to express emotions he had long kept to himself to his father.

In this section, Bowker enters a sort of ghost-like existence where human interaction really only seems possible through his imagination. Bowker drives around alone, at the edge of society – as represented by his constant driving

around the outside of the lake – thus never really permeating the circle of society and not actually going anywhere. He floats around, as a ghost, without any real human interaction as he becomes only questionably human as well. When he goes to the A&W, he does not recognize anyone and the carhop does not even notice him, even after he honked his horn: “he felt invisible in the soft twilight” (151). Then, Bowker continues this sequence of imaginary conversations with a conversation through the intercom at the A&W with the person who takes orders. Bowker begins to tell his story to the order-taker which again, makes him smile, but he quickly stops and reverts back into his guarded state, as if he feels unnatural talking, even though it is exactly what he wants and needs to do. Bowker becomes so used to keeping his feelings to himself or between his things and himself that he has trouble reconnecting with people in society after the war. The chapter ends with Bowker’s realization that in reality, “there was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would” (153) thus leaving him disconnected from any real human interaction and possibly leading to his suicide (that O’Brien mentions in the chapter, “Notes”). Bowker is unable to settle down in reality, so opts to commit suicide. Human interaction is the main component lacking from Bowker’s life. His suicide proves the importance of human interaction, connection, and relationships to the soldiers. It seems that Bowker thinks it is too late for him. He has so much built up inside of him from his war experiences that it would be impossible to get everything off of his chest. He also saw so many horrible things and felt such guilt that he seems to think that he will offend his loved ones rather than help them to understand and accept him.

Mary Anne similarly begins to take on these ghost-like characteristics (in the eyes of the soldiers) when she separates herself from the soldiers and her boyfriend, thus alienating herself. Rat Kiley remembers seeing the Greenies and Mary Anne: “the seven silhouettes seemed to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous and unreal... it made him think of some weird opium dream. The silhouettes moved without moving” (105). As Mary Anne disconnects herself from the soldiers she first visited, she begins to take on these ghostly characteristics as well. As human interaction dwindles, the characters become surreal and thus, removed from reality.

The chapter, “Ghost Soldiers,” also touches upon the ghost-like existence (like that experienced by Bowker) that the lack of human interaction produces. The lack of the interaction the soldiers have with any human enemy leads to O’Brien’s inclusion of a ghost element. When anyone dies, the soldiers are left to handle the blame themselves because they usually do not see or interact with their enemy. O’Brien explains that the soldiers refer to the hidden enemies as “enemy ghosts” and that the soldiers “were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science” (202). Here, the lack of interaction with the enemy leads O’Brien and the soldiers to view the VC men and women as supernatural creatures. With this lack of important interaction, the soldiers again experience a break with reality since they play into the idea of people as supernatural beings. Azar, one of the men in O’Brien’s troop refers to Vietnam as “fantasyland” and acknowledges, “I sometimes can’t remember what real *is*” (204). O’Brien similarly remarks that “imagination takes over” (204). Without an interaction with

the enemy, the soldiers have trouble remaining grounded in reality and consequently succumb to placing any blame and aggression that should go towards a human enemy, on their things.

In the same chapter, O'Brien shares the character, O'Brien's experiences when recovering from the bullet wound and reconnecting with his old company at his recovery base. In "The Ghost Soldiers," O'Brien feels left out of the group as his company has moved on without him and has embraced its new members. O'Brien (the character) has been injured and thus separated from his company. O'Brien is separated from them as he is the only one to be injured at this specific point in time. He tries to break back into "society" (into his company's society) but does not fully succeed. Thus, he is alone and empty, lifeless among the living. The swiftness with which O'Brien goes from being "one of the guys" to an outcast from his company illustrates the lack of depth in the bonds formed between the soldiers. Through this story, the bonds of company brotherhood are portrayed as weak and not real or significant.

Things, both non-human and human, play a central role in *The Things They Carried*, especially in comparison to the lesser roles of individual soldiers and soldier interactions. Some things are damaging to the soldiers, while others are comforting, and still others move between meanings and thus always affect the soldiers and their relationships with others in different ways. The lack of fully developed human interaction throughout the piece opens up a world of unreality to the soldiers and leaves a hole in the soldiers' lives that can only be filled by relationships with their things and imaginary relationships (which are typically an

extension of their things). The soldiers long for these close interpersonal relationships but also fear them because in war, the more distance the soldiers keep from each other, the less they are hurt when someone is killed. Thus, they use their things as a crutch to keep themselves strong and unaffected. At the same time, the intensity of the relationship between things and the soldiers gets in the way of human-to-human relationships. The soldiers' loneliness and isolation as well as the soldiers' frustration with not being loved, listened to, or understood emerges, in part, out of their perpetual interaction with things and the amount to which these interactions take the place of real human interaction.

In a way, *The Things They Carried* can be viewed as O'Brien's attempt at being understood, loved, and listened to. He constantly mentions his desire to be understood and listened to throughout the collection of short stories. At times, he almost begs the reader to understand or checks in with the reader to make sure they understand. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien tries so hard to make the reader understand that he writes it almost as an essay, with examples and then explanation. Through this book, O'Brien can connect with others. Yet, like his characters, he only accomplishes this connection and understanding through a book – a thing.

While the things in *The Things They Carried* can generally be separated into non-human and human things, gray areas become the rule rather than the exception as everything blends into everything in the unreality of the Vietnam War. This ambiguity allows the soldiers to focus on things rather than on interpersonal relationships or on mourning their dead. This focus leads the men

further into a world of the imaginary and further out of reality. Additionally, it forces them down a path of alienation and leaves them longing and emotional.

The soldiers' relationships with their things, therefore, take an enormous toll on them through their things' intensity of meaning and overbearing power: "they carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (7).



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## Summary

In every way, Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*, urges readers to focus on things throughout the book. The title alone places things as the subjects of the story and even O'Brien's first line – "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" (1) – centers around a thing. Through the lists of things that the men carry in the first chapter, also titled "The Things They Carried," O'Brien once again attempts to tip off the reader to the importance of things. In my thesis, "The Connection Between Humans and Things in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," I also urge readers to focus on things. In particular, I study the complex relationships and interactions between things and humans in O'Brien's piece.

In the Vietnam War (during which most of O'Brien's action takes place), O'Brien establishes that there is, a significant absence of intimate (or as O'Brien would describe it, "real") human relationships. He does this, in part, by including two of O'Brien's (the character's) relationships outside of the war which he considers to be "real": one with a childhood girlfriend who dies from cancer and one with an innkeeper who helps him decide to go to war when he considers dodging the draft. These two relationships are defined by deep understanding

beyond language. The characters involved could be silent and still understand each other's thoughts and feelings. These two relationships set the standard for all other relationships in the book.

The wartime relationships, on the other hand, do not live up to this standard of human interaction. The relationships between the soldiers are defined by very much talk and banter and very little understanding. The soldiers interact in this way because they are afraid to express their emotions and to form close bonds with other soldiers. The men fear being considered cowardly if they open up to anyone and share their emotions. The men also fear that if they become close to another soldier, they would not be able to handle the emotional toll if that soldier was killed. To further avoid dealing with death and other serious and emotional topics, the soldiers interact through humor, also causing their relationships to remain superficial.

Because they must deal with so many experiences that seem to go against human nature, (such as dealing with death daily, being separated from all that they know, and living under constant stress) more than ever before, the men need and crave an outlet for their pent-up emotions. As a result, the men conveniently turn to their things as a means through which they can release emotion. As they begin to depend more and more on their things, the value of these things to the soldiers grows immensely while their inter-human relationships become even more sidelined. Relationships with things begin to replace relationships with people for the soldiers.

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien describes the war as

having a blurring effect on a variety of concepts. He writes,

Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, love into anarchy, civility into savagery (82).

In the chaos and haze of war, things similarly exist in a gray area where fine lines between things do not exist. He explains that even opposite things can blend into each other because war, at its essence, is a combination of opposites: “War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead” (80).

In light of these explanations, the amplified role and value of things to the soldiers in conjunction with the decreased meaning that other people have, in the eyes of the soldiers, leads to the blurring of people and things in the book. The soldiers interact with things as if they were interacting with people and the soldiers often treat people as things, in order to stay at an emotional distance from them. These unconventional wartime interactions cause the soldiers to both voluntarily and involuntarily break from reality and encourage them to create imaginary alternate realities.

In order to discuss this changed relationship between things and humans, I break up my paper into non-human things, which include keepsakes and supplies and human things, which include bodies and body parts. These two sections demonstrate that while non-human things and human things differ in actual material content, the soldiers do not treat human things with more emotion than they experience in reaction to non-human things. Thus, bodies and humans are inextricably blurred together in this piece. I also include a section discussing how

O'Brien demonstrates the lack of human interaction in the piece and how the soldiers still crave for real human interaction and understanding even though they temporarily replace it with their relationships with things.

In preparing this study of the connections between people and things, I drew on the recently developed study of things, "thing theory." "Thing theory," as "thing theorist" Bill Brown explains it, attempts to understand the meaning and value in things that used to be seen as only part of the backdrop of a story. In writing this piece, I attempted to view each thing in *The Things They Carried* in this way: moving things from the background to the forefront.

Because things are so central to O'Brien's work, and because O'Brien's book is so central to Vietnam War literature (let alone American literature in general), I believe it was important to analyze *The Things They Carried* through this new theory, as it has not been done before. It is so easy to become wrapped up in the bigger feeling of a piece of war literature like *The Things They Carried*, but I believe it is imperative to remember that the details, the things in the piece, were what brought you to this bigger feeling in the first place.