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*The Things They Carried* Essay

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A 20th Century Guilt Trip to the Vietnam War

It is truly remarkable how feelings are able to alter one’s perceptions of how they go about life. Audre Lorde, an infamous poet, believes that “g[uilt](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/guilt) is not a response to [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger); it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action”(Lorde, Audre). This description perfectly coincides with the people, events, and decisions shown throughout *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. The novel takes the audience not only through the drafting of the Vietnam War, but the audience is taken through the actual events and perspectives of those who were in the military. O’Brien himself takes part in the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1970; his own experiences clearly shape the content of this insightful piece of literature, touching the hearts of many intellectuals and students alike. It is not often that an author is able integrate a perfect harmony of elements into a story to truly emphasize an important theme, which in this case is guilt. *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien truly encompasses the idea of guilt throughout the story with the three appeals, as well as a multitude of rhetorical devices; this is not only seen through the fear of not following the societal norms of that time era, as well as the emotional burdens they face during the war, but is also shown through the way he evokes the element of realism throughout the chapters.

The power society has on an individual is immense, and O’Brien executes this message with a flourish of rhetoric. This grip society can have on an individual is frightening. O’Brien admits,“I also feared the war, yes, but I also fear exile” (42). His statement shows a glimpse of what men had to experience in terms of societal views. The standards society imposed on men during the Vietnam War Era plays a heavy role with the guilt O’Brien faced, as he contemplated avoiding the draft and fleeing to Canada. O’Brien conveys this guilt by appealing to pathos. For instance in the chapter, “On the Rainy River”, O'Brien’s anecdote on the emotional turmoil he faces after receiving a draft notice is riddled with examples of pathos. An excerpt states, “And what was so sad, I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy… I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave…All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe— and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment… I couldn’t tolerate it. I couldn’t endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule” (48-57). This excerpt is able to gain the sympathy of the audience as the tone captures the distress O’Brien faced. This appeals not only to the audience emotionally, but also highlights the striking effort O’Brien puts into choosing what is morally right and expected of him as a man in the twentieth century. This pressure to serve his country and to be approved by society on a twenty-one year old is undoubtedly unhealthy. This evokes sympathy from the audience as it touches upon the subject of the youth suffering because of the decisions others (likely older people) made. Additionally, the anaphora captured within the repetition of the words “I would not” highlights the contrast between O’Brien’s desires and reality, while the repeated “I couldn’t” solidifies the guilt that encompasses the thought process. This allows the audience to go beyond merely knowing what a draft is about. It offers insight on the mental experiences that the human psyche goes through, in turn ultimately allowing the audience to be engaged throughout the novel.

The guilt that encompasses this novel is not only found in regards to bending to society’s wishes, but also the guilt of betraying one's own philosophy and beliefs to succumb to what society expects. O’Brien recounts, “I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was twenty-one years old.” (38). Pathos is utilized here as it describes the author at such a prime age, but his youth is being wasted on a war in which he does not even agree with. This would reach the hearts of the readers as it is the reality of war that is being introduced. Part of the role of being a citizen of the United States is the draft that O’Brien aforementioned. This compels the audience to have sympathy for the author who was put through such distressing emotional tribulations as a young adult. The guilt of committing atrocities against other humans is weighed against the guilt of avoiding the draft and abandoning his duties as a citizen as one section of the novel.

As the novel reaches its culmination, the soldier’s emotional abuse from the Vietnam war becomes apparent. O’Brien describes the emotional baggage weighing down the soldiers; the “grief, terror, love, longing- these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (20). Long after the heavy artillery is lifted from their shoulders, the emotional scars of the war will never cease to remain. The traumatic effects of burying the dead, the comradery, cruelty, and insanity of human nature, will forever be engraved into their memory. The soldiers carry the weight of a myriad of deaths, including their beloved Ted Lavender. The guilt that encompasses them will follow them for the rest of their lives. Even in the aftermath of the war, O’Brien was still a slave to the torture he faced in Vietnam. Years later, he states, “in the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I’m reading a newspaper or sitting alone in a room, I’ll look up and see the young man step out of the morning fog” (128). The author is haunted by the memory of killing a man. O’Brien’s fear of death drove him to throw his grenade, but now lives in regret of doing so. He carries the emotional and physical scars of what he has done and now sees the world through a new lense. The things he carries- his experiences and beliefs- have turned his life upside down, depicting the progression of a lovestruck man to a strong and haunted war veteran. Subsequently, the novel resonances with a sense of ethos. O’Brien uses his experience to elucidate the tribulations faced at war, compelling the audience to believe his words. This is done to accurately depict the burden of a guilty conscience.

Transitioning into the idea of realism, the audience is definitely able to see the form that it takes consistently throughout the novel. From the very beginning, O’Brien uses crude terms to create a sense of imagery for the readers. He describes the soldiers, saying “They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity” (14). His use of the phrase “stink of fungus and decay” allows the readers to envision the conditions that the soldiers were in. The word “decay” also refers to the dead bodies of those who they may have possibly killed, or their fellow soldiers who may have died beside them. Additionally, the word “gravity” shows the tremendous burden that they carried, “the things they carried,” which can easily be connected back to guilt. In addition to the imagery, O’Brien uses anaphora, reusing the phrase “they carried” to give the readers a sense of perspective, regarding what the soldiers endured and had to do. The soldiers not only had to deal with the friends of those who died, but they practically carry the weight of the world on their shoulders, trying their best to serve their country, as well as stay alive. The crude and therefore realistic words, as well as anaphora, shows that O'Brien uses is very necessary to the overall novel because it gives the audience an idea of the burden the soldiers carry through the guilt of killing others and witnessing their fellow soldiers die as well.

Further into the novel, O’Brien discusses what makes a war story a *true* war story, and he states as follows: “True war stories do not generalize. They do no indulge in abstraction or analysis..it comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (74). His opinion on this explains why he tends to gravitate towards raw and gut-wrenching descriptions of what the soldiers deal with in war. He believes that a true war story is one that is going to make the audience feel the events from their own stomachs; he isn’t afraid to use those descriptions to show the idea of guilt throughout the book. In a way, O’Brien appeals to logos because his use of realism establishes his belief that all of the things the soldiers went through were terrible, and all of these things resulted from the guilt they would face had they ended up *not* going to war. In fact, realism is an argument itself because the elements of anaphora, imagery, and crude word choice challenged all the events that led both to and up to the war. This allows the author to stand out as someone who isn't afraid to bring into light the real things that happened to him. This is not only through his perspective, but other people's as well.

As Tim O’Brien leads his audience into the mindset of soldiers during the Vietnam War, he constantly reinforces the feeling of guilt. It is clearly shown throughout the novel by a plethora of rhetorical elements. For instance, O’Brien depicts the concept of guilt by appealing to the rhetoric element of pathos. His appeal to pathos in the novel highlights the accumulative concern over the draft all as well as abandoning his duties as a “man” and citizen of the United States that society imposed. Furthermore, going against his beliefs of the war had also created a sense of guilt as he was not fighting the war for the right reasons. It was to appease the social constructs rather than for his country or beliefs.Similarly, O’Brien encompasses the idea of guilt by showing the emotional burdens that a soldier must carry throughout the war. The appeal to ethos in this sections notifies the audience that the speaker is qualified to give insight on the experiences as a soldier.

The raw nature of violence within the flames of war directly ties into the feeling of guilt. O’Brien illustrates this by taking a sad, truthful, and grim tone, giving the audience a sense of how the soldiers must feel.The realism within the novel appeals to the rhetorical element of logos as an embodied fact, in which O’Brien asserts his claim in the book by showing all the burdens and grief they faced through his use of imagery and anaphora. This brings into question a very important idea: How did this guilt shape the novel overall? The sense of guilt embedded within the novel gives the novel an overall purpose; it is able to reach across audiences in order to convey the message of a soldier’s true experience in a war. This offers an alternative for the author to *show* the audience rather than stating the what the hardships the soldiers had faced. Furthermore, reader from any time period are able to take away the insight on the experiences O’Brien describes of being a soldier. The hearts of all audiences can be touched with this piece of literature, which was as clear, and refreshingly honest, as you'd expect from someone of the author's caliber. All in all, this novel embodied the theme of guilt throughout the story through multiple elements, specifically his use of rhetoric, his and others experiences in the story, and his stress on keeping things realistic.

Works Cited

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