Questions for Discussion

Cole Gannon

2021.03.05-07

1. What is the effect of O’Brien’s use of abbreviations and acronyms: R&R, SOP, M&Ms, USO, Psy Ops, KIA?

All of these are to make war seem like what it is: a cold and well-oiled machine optimized for conquest and killing other people. This entire story deals with the human aspect of the Vietnam War. The usage of all of these acronyms is actually to dehumanize the process of war and the actions that they were told to perform. It’s basically to take the emotion out of

1. When the author writes, “Afterward they burned Than Khe,” what is he telling us about the attitude of the men toward the people in the villages around them?

Quite plainly, they have little regard for the Vietnamese people living there. To dig deeper though, this is also them taking out their frustration and anxieties of war on the people who lived there. Just from the way that Cross seemed to view things in a haze, like the soldiers were inside some sort of illusion that was not reality. Perhaps such thinking was the only way for them to remain mentally stable, that the world they belong in is not the one they were in right now. (read more about this in question 4)

1. Why is it important to specify the weight of the equipment each man is carrying?

The physical weight of items like rations and munitions, while showing that each grunt was literally carrying a heavy weight on his back, is less important than the symbolic weight placed upon them as soldiers in a war that they didn’t want to fight.

1. Does the language of each soldier sound “real”? Do the descriptions of the weapons have the feeling of reality?

The most “real” part of this entire story was the “Boom-down” moment. Cross is drifting off into his fantasies about Martha. Boom! There’s a snap back to reality as one of his men actually dies. And the other soldiers seem just as surprised, as if shaken awake from a dream. While we only get to see Cross’ inner thoughts and fantasies in detail, it seems that every other squad or platoon member was just as disassociated with the entire situation.

*He enjoyed not being dead. Lying there, Kiowa admired Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's capacity for grief. He wanted to share the man's pain, he wanted to care as Jimmy Cross cared. And yet when he closed his eyes, all he could think was Boom-down, and all he could feel was the pleasure of having his boots off and the fog curling in around him and the damp soil and the Bible smells and the plush comfort of night.*

We can see just how far removed Kiowa was from the reality of the situation. In that moment, he’s just trying to grapple with and internalize the death of someone that could have been him. This entire story has a feeling of uneasy un-realness that is briefly interrupted by Lavender’s death. The soldiers do sound real but only as real as the reality that the soldiers themselves are able to accept.

1. Why does the lieutenant burn the letters he has been carrying?

After Lavender was killed, Cross blames his death on his love for Martha, in a somewhat childish manner, I might add. Burning the letters from Martha was supposed to be a symbolic thing for Cross of him never returning to the world where Martha was.

1. Soldiers from both sides are fighting the war, but the author only tells us about the men from one side. Why doesn’t he describe the North Vietnamese soldiers?

I think a good part of why O’Brien didn’t describe the North Vietnamese soldiers is because of his lack of familiarity with them as people. Since O’Brien himself was part of the American side. A different perspective to take is that O’Brien was trying to help readers to have some empathy for the young American men drafted into a war they had no business fighting. Trying to describe the North Vietnamese standpoint may have been seen as validating their cause. It could’ve been very contentious at the time and perhaps seen as dishonorable to those who were KIA.

1. Discuss the attitudes toward the war in the United States as they are reflected in the attitudes of the soldiers in “The Things They Carried.”

*It was not courage, exactly; the object was not valor. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards.*

This passage leads into the next question quite smoothly but the attitude is clearly that these soldiers don’t want to be here. They were too afraid to say that since it might be viewed as non-manly and unpatriotic. Instead, all of them was willing to die from a gunshot rather than objecting to the war itself.

1. Stories about men at war usually emphasize heroism and heroic acts; these are completely absent in this story. What has caused this change in attitude?

The Vietnam War was not very popular in United States since we were getting our noses into business that wasn’t ours to begin with. There’s not a particular thing *in the story* where this attitude changes. Rather, it was the author’s intention to portray the war as what it was. O’Brien himself was a soldier in the Vietnam War, and knew from personal experience that this war, and any war, was not about heroism and glory.