
War Trauma and the Burden of Memory: Guilt, Identity, and Human Suffering in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

Majid Khan¹, Maheen Amjad², Farooq Ahmad³, Shoaib Noor⁴

¹ Government College University Faisalabad, BS English Literature. Email:

Majidalmani02@gmail.com

² M.S. English Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Science and Technology, Nawabshah. Email: maheenbhatti456@gmail.com

³ M.S. Scholar, Foundation University, Email: Farooqahmad6971@gmail.com

⁴ M.S. English Linguistics Scholar, Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro. Email: noorshoaib889@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.2613>

Abstract

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) presents the Vietnam War through the experiences, memories, fears, and psychological struggles of American soldiers. Rather than portraying war as a heroic or patriotic experience, O'Brien focuses on the physical, emotional, and moral suffering produced by combat. This paper examines how war continues to affect soldiers even after they leave the battlefield. Using a qualitative textual-analysis and close-reading approach, the study analyzes selected episodes, characters, symbols, and narrative techniques, particularly in "On the Rainy River," "The Things They Carried," "The Man I Killed," "In the Field," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Speaking of Courage," and "The Lives of the Dead." The analysis is informed by trauma theory, especially the concepts of traumatic memory, repetition, fragmentation, guilt, and storytelling. The study argues that the soldiers carry not only physical objects such as weapons, ammunition, food, and personal belongings but also invisible burdens, including fear, grief, guilt, shame, loneliness, and memories of violence. O'Brien's fragmented narrative structure reflects the unstable nature of traumatic memory, while his distinction between "story-truth" and "happeningtruth" demonstrates the difficulty of representing traumatic experience through conventional narrative. The study concludes that *The Things They Carried* presents war as a continuing psychological and moral experience whose consequences remain with soldiers long after combat has ended.

Keywords: *Tim O'Brien; The Things They Carried; Vietnam War; Trauma; Memory; Guilt; Storytelling; Human Suffering*

Background of the Study

War literature has traditionally been associated with courage, sacrifice, patriotism, and military victory. However, modern war writers frequently challenge these heroic representations by focusing on fear, loss, psychological suffering, moral uncertainty, and the experiences of ordinary soldiers. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, first published in 1990, is an important example of this approach. Although commonly described as a novel, the work is a collection of

interconnected stories that combines fictional techniques, autobiographical elements, historical memory, and imaginative reconstruction. The title establishes one of the text's central concerns. The soldiers literally carry weapons, ammunition, food, clothing, medical supplies, photographs, letters, and other personal objects. At the same time, they carry invisible emotional and psychological burdens. These include fear of death, guilt over killing, grief for dead comrades, shame, loneliness, responsibility, and memories of combat. The physical weight of military equipment therefore becomes a metaphor for the psychological weight of war. O'Brien also challenges the conventional distinction between fact and fiction. Through repeated storytelling, altered details, and different perspectives, he demonstrates that traumatic experiences are difficult to represent through a simple chronological account. His narrative connects war with memory, imagination, identity, and emotional truth. Hassebrock and Boyle (2009) explain that the text can be read as an exploration of the way memory constructs the self, the psyche, and the narrative persona.

Problem Statement

Traditional representations of soldiers often emphasize bravery, patriotism, sacrifice, and victory. Such representations may overlook the psychological and moral consequences of warfare. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien presents soldiers as frightened, vulnerable, confused, and emotionally burdened individuals. They experience not only physical danger but also guilt, grief, shame, trauma, and difficulty returning to civilian life. The problem addressed in this study is the need to understand how O'Brien represents the human consequences of war beyond physical injury and battlefield death. The study particularly focuses on the ways trauma, memory, guilt, and storytelling reveal the continuing effects of war on soldiers.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on *The Things They Carried* has examined trauma, guilt, memory, narrative form, and the representation of war. Al-Masoudi (2023) emphasizes post-traumatic memory, guilt, and the inability of veterans to resume ordinary social lives. Field (2020) examines the soldierly code of silence, isolation, and duty, arguing that these forces contribute to the dehumanization of O'Brien's soldiers. Hassebrock and Boyle (2009) discuss the relationship between memory, identity, narrative, and persona. Recent scholarship extends these concerns. Dhobi (2025) examines power imbalance in O'Brien's representation of war, while a comparative study by D'Souza and Menon (2025) considers narrative therapy and war trauma in O'Brien's work. Punia (2026) discusses resilience and the representation of war. These studies indicate that the novel remains relevant to current discussions of trauma, power, recovery, and narrative. Although these studies provide valuable perspectives, the relationship between physical suffering, psychological trauma, moral responsibility, grief, memory, and narrative form can be examined more comprehensively. This study brings these dimensions together to demonstrate how they collectively construct the human cost of war in O'Brien's text.

Research Objectives

1. Examine the representation of war and human suffering in *The Things They Carried*.
2. Analyze the psychological and emotional burdens carried by the soldiers.
3. Explore the relationship between trauma, memory, guilt, and storytelling.
4. Examine how O'Brien's fragmented narrative structure represents traumatic experience.
5. Analyze the difficulties soldiers experience when returning to civilian life.

Research Questions

1. How does O'Brien represent war as a source of physical, psychological, and moral suffering?
2. What symbolic and emotional meanings are attached to the things carried by the soldiers?
3. How is trauma, guilt, fear, grief, and memory represented in the text?
4. How does O'Brien use fragmented narration and storytelling to represent traumatic experience?
5. How does the novel portray the difficulties of returning to civilian life?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to the understanding of modern war literature by focusing on the human consequences of warfare. It demonstrates how literature can represent experiences that may be difficult to communicate through conventional historical or factual narratives. The study may also help students understand the relationship between trauma, memory, identity, guilt, and storytelling in literary texts. The study is particularly relevant to literary scholarship because O'Brien's text does not simply describe war; it examines how war changes the ways in which individuals remember, speak, and understand themselves. It also demonstrates how fiction can communicate emotional and moral realities that may not be fully captured by factual documentation alone.

Literature Review

War Literature and the Crisis of Heroism

War literature frequently examines the experiences of individuals who participate in or are affected by armed conflict. While earlier representations often emphasized heroism and national duty, modern war literature increasingly questions these assumptions. Contemporary war narratives frequently focus on fear, death, psychological injury, moral ambiguity, and the lasting consequences of combat. O'Brien's work belongs to this tradition because it emphasizes uncertainty, fear, death, emotional suffering, and moral confusion rather than presenting war as a straightforward heroic experience. His soldiers do not consistently act from patriotism or political conviction. They often act because they are afraid of shame, social judgment, or appearing cowardly. "On the Rainy River" demonstrates this complexity. The narrator considers escaping to Canada because he does not want to participate in the Vietnam War. However, his fear of being regarded as a coward eventually influences his decision to report for military service. His decision suggests that social pressure may be as powerful as military authority. The story consequently challenges the assumption that participation in war is always an expression of patriotism or courage.

Trauma and War Literature

Trauma is central to O'Brien's representation of war. The soldiers experience frightening events during combat, but the consequences of those events continue after the fighting has ended. Traumatic experiences return through memories, images, repetition, dreams, guilt, silence, and storytelling. Trauma in the novel is not represented through one isolated incident. Instead, it emerges through repeated memories and unresolved emotions. The narrator returns to particular deaths and violent experiences because the past remains psychologically present. Al-Masoudi (2023) identifies post-traumatic memories, permanent guilt, and confusion as major obstacles preventing veterans from returning fully to ordinary social life. The narrative form itself reflects trauma. O'Brien does not present the Vietnam War in a straightforward chronological order.

Instead, he returns to events, revises them, and presents them from different perspectives. This technique suggests that traumatic experiences resist orderly explanation. They are remembered repeatedly, but repetition does not necessarily bring closure.

Memory, Narrative, and Identity

Memory in *The Things They Carried* is not a fixed record of the past. It is active, selective, and shaped by emotion. Hassebrock and Boyle (2009) argue that O'Brien's text demonstrates how memory is used to construct a self, a psyche, and a narrative persona. Their discussion is particularly relevant to the narrator's repeated reconstruction of the Vietnamese man's death and his memories of the war. The narrator's changing accounts suggest that memory is influenced by present concerns. An event may be remembered differently as the narrator attempts to understand his past and define his identity. The issue is therefore not simply whether a memory is factually accurate. It is also necessary to consider what psychological and emotional function the memory performs. The novel's distinction between "story-truth" and "happening-truth" develops this issue further. "Happening-truth" refers to literal historical facts, while "story-truth" refers to the emotional and psychological meaning communicated through narrative. O'Brien suggests that a story may convey the emotional reality of war even when some details have been altered or imagined.

The Soldierly Code and Coping

Field (2020) examines the relationship between the soldierly code and war trauma. According to Field, O'Brien's work is not a glorification of war or of the soldier. Instead, it is a critique of a code that privileges silence, duty, obedience, and emotional control over personal health and wellbeing. This argument helps explain why O'Brien's soldiers often struggle to cope with their experiences. They are expected to remain silent, obey orders, and suppress vulnerability. Such expectations isolate them from their fellow soldiers and from civilian society. The soldierly code may create temporary discipline during combat, but it can become destructive after the war. The characters' use of humor also reflects this problem. Jokes and teasing allow the soldiers to manage fear temporarily, but humor cannot eliminate guilt or grief. Their coping strategies often conceal suffering rather than resolve it.

Recent Scholarship and Continuing Relevance

Recent scholarship confirms that O'Brien's text continues to support new interpretations. Dhobi (2025) examines power imbalance in the novel, drawing attention to the relationship between military authority, social hierarchy, and the representation of vulnerable subjects. This perspective complements trauma-based readings by showing that suffering is shaped not only by individual psychology but also by institutional power. D'Souza and Menon (2025) connect O'Brien's work with narrative therapy and argue that storytelling can function as a means of psychological reconstruction. Their approach is useful for understanding why the narrator repeatedly returns to the same events. Storytelling does not simply report trauma; it becomes a practice through which trauma is interpreted and made communicable. Punia (2026) focuses on resilience in the representation of war. A resilience-based reading should not be confused with a claim that trauma disappears. Rather, it suggests that survivors may use memory, narrative, relationships, and artistic expression to continue living with experiences that cannot be erased. Taken together, recent scholarship shows that *The Things They Carried* remains relevant to debates concerning power, memory, recovery, and the ethical representation of war.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma Theory

This study uses trauma theory as its primary theoretical framework. Trauma theory provides a way of understanding experiences that overwhelm an individual's ability to process or communicate them normally. In literary studies, trauma is frequently associated with repetition, fragmented memory, silence, delayed understanding, emotional disconnection, and difficulties in representing painful events (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; Whitehead, 2004). In O'Brien's work, traumatic experiences are repeatedly remembered and retold. The narrator does not describe the past once and then move forward. Instead, he returns to particular deaths, locations, and experiences from different perspectives. This repetition suggests that traumatic events remain psychologically unresolved. Trauma theory is particularly useful for analyzing the narrator's memories of the Vietnamese man, Norman Bowker's inability to reconnect with civilian life, and the repeated accounts of Kiowa's death. These episodes demonstrate how war remains present even after the soldiers have physically left Vietnam.

Memory and Repetition

Memory is presented in the novel as unstable rather than fixed. O'Brien repeatedly changes details and provides different versions of events. This technique suggests that memory is influenced by emotion, guilt, imagination, and the need to communicate. Repetition is significant because traumatic experiences return again and again. The deaths of Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, Kiowa, and Linda remain present through memories and stories. However, repetition does not simply reproduce the past. Each retelling provides a different emotional emphasis and encourages the reader to reconsider the event.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is another important feature of the novel. Instead of presenting the Vietnam War as a continuous chronological narrative, O'Brien constructs the text through interconnected stories. The narrative moves between Vietnam, the United States, childhood, and the post-war period. This fragmented form reflects the disrupted nature of traumatic memory. The past is not arranged as a stable sequence. It appears in images, scenes, memories, conversations, and sudden returns. The form of the novel therefore becomes an important representation of the psychological consequences of war.

Guilt and Moral Responsibility

Guilt functions as a major psychological and moral burden. Lieutenant Cross blames himself for Ted Lavender's death because he believes that his thoughts about Martha distracted him. The narrator feels responsible for the Vietnamese man. Norman Bowker struggles with his role in Kiowa's death.

These examples demonstrate that soldiers may blame themselves even when events are beyond their complete control. War creates situations in which responsibility is difficult to define, but guilt remains powerful. Trauma is therefore connected not only to fear and grief but also to moral judgment.

Storytelling as Survival

Storytelling becomes a method through which the narrator attempts to preserve memory and communicate experiences that are difficult to express directly. The act of storytelling does not erase trauma, but it gives suffering a form that can be shared. Stories also allow the narrator to

maintain a relationship with the dead. In “The Lives of the Dead,” storytelling keeps Linda symbolically alive. Similarly, the stories about Kiowa, Lavender, Lemon, and the Vietnamese man prevent their experiences from disappearing completely.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design because it focuses on interpretation rather than statistical measurement. The research examines literary language, characters, symbols, narrative structure, repetition, and themes to understand the representation of war and trauma. No interviews, questionnaires, surveys, experiments, or statistical procedures are used.

Textual and Close-Reading Approach

A textual and close-reading approach is used to examine selected episodes from *The Things They Carried*. Attention is given to characterization, symbolism, narrative structure, repetition, point of view, emotional language, and the relationship between literal and symbolic meaning. Close reading is appropriate for this study because O’Brien’s themes are communicated not only through plot but also through narrative form. The repeated presentation of events, the changing versions of memories, and the juxtaposition of physical objects with emotional burdens require detailed textual interpretation.

Primary Text

The primary text is Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. The paper follows the 1990 Houghton Mifflin edition for publication information. Because pagination varies across editions, page numbers are not supplied for paraphrases. Direct quotations should be checked against the student’s physical or electronic edition before submission.

Selected Episodes

The analysis focuses on “The Things They Carried,” “On the Rainy River,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” “The Man I Killed,” “In the Field,” “Speaking of Courage,” and “The Lives of the Dead.” These episodes are examined in relation to physical suffering, trauma, fear, guilt, grief, memory, storytelling, moral responsibility, and post-war reintegration.

Analytical Procedure

The selected material was examined through repeated reading and thematic interpretation. Recurring concepts were identified and organized into major analytical categories: physical suffering and death; psychological trauma; fear, shame, and guilt; grief and loss; memory and repetition; storytelling and emotional truth; fragmented narrative; moral responsibility; and difficulty returning to civilian life. The analysis then connected these themes with trauma theory and relevant scholarship on O’Brien’s work.

Analysis and Discussion

War Beyond Heroism

O’Brien challenges traditional heroic representations of war by presenting soldiers as ordinary human beings who experience fear, uncertainty, confusion, and emotional vulnerability. The soldiers are not consistently motivated by patriotism or a clear belief in the political purpose of the war.

“On the Rainy River” is particularly important in this regard. The narrator considers escaping to Canada because he does not want to fight. He is morally uncertain about the war and emotionally

overwhelmed by the possibility of military service. However, he eventually decides to go to Vietnam because he fears social humiliation and being called a coward.

The episode demonstrates that participation in war can be influenced by social expectations as much as by personal conviction. O'Brien consequently complicates the conventional concept of courage. Going to war does not necessarily mean that an individual supports the war. Sometimes it means that the individual fears the judgment of others more than the dangers of combat.

The narrator's description of himself as a coward for going to war reverses the conventional meaning of courage and cowardice. His decision suggests that refusing to participate might have represented greater moral courage than obeying social expectations. By presenting the decision in this way, O'Brien questions the patriotic assumptions attached to military service.

The Symbolism of Burden

The title *The Things They Carried* has both literal and symbolic meanings. The soldiers carry weapons, ammunition, food, clothing, medical equipment, photographs, letters, and personal belongings. These objects establish the physical reality of military life. The objects also symbolize emotional burdens. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries Martha's letters and photographs, demonstrating his attachment to life outside Vietnam. Kiowa carries a Bible and moccasins, while Henry Dobbins carries extra food and his girlfriend's pantyhose. These personal items reveal the individuality of the soldiers, but they also show how each soldier remains connected to a world beyond combat.

The physical inventory gradually becomes an emotional inventory. The soldiers carry fear, responsibility, memories, guilt, grief, and longing. The things they carry therefore represent more than military preparation. They represent the psychological consequences of war.

Lieutenant Cross's letters from Martha are especially significant. He imagines Martha as a source of emotional escape, but his attachment also produces guilt. After Ted Lavender dies, Cross believes that his private thoughts distracted him from his responsibility as a leader. The letters become connected to Lavender's death and consequently acquire a painful moral meaning.

Physical Pain and Death

Physical suffering is presented as a normal part of military existence. The soldiers walk long distances, carry heavy equipment, sleep in dangerous environments, and remain exposed to heat, mud, disease, explosions, and gunfire. The ordinary routines of walking, waiting, cleaning weapons, and maintaining equipment are always threatened by sudden violence. Ted Lavender's death particularly challenges heroic representations of battlefield death. He is killed suddenly while returning from the bathroom. His death is not presented through a dramatic heroic sacrifice. Instead, it is abrupt and seemingly random. The ordinariness of the moment emphasizes the vulnerability of the soldiers and the lack of control they possess over life and death. Lavender's death also demonstrates how quickly a human life becomes associated with objects. The details of what the soldiers carry are placed beside the reality of death. Military equipment, tranquilizers, ammunition, and personal belongings become reminders of individual identities and fears. Kiowa's death demonstrates the relationship between physical place and psychological trauma. He dies in a muddy field while attempting to help another soldier. The field later becomes a powerful location of memory and guilt. It is not simply a battlefield; it becomes a psychological landscape that the soldiers repeatedly revisit. In "In the Field," the soldiers remember Kiowa's death in different ways. Their conflicting memories demonstrate that traumatic events do not produce one simple interpretation. Each character attempts to understand responsibility, failure, and survival

from a different perspective. The uncertainty surrounding the death does not reduce its emotional power; rather, uncertainty becomes one of the sources of suffering.

Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma is one of the most important aspects of the novel. The soldiers experience fear during combat, but the emotional consequences continue after they return home. Their memories appear through images, silences, repeated stories, and obsessive attention to particular scenes.

“The Man I Killed” illustrates this particularly clearly. After the death of a Vietnamese man, the narrator imagines the man’s family, education, personality, and future. Instead of seeing him simply as an enemy, he imagines him as an individual human being. This imaginative reconstruction demonstrates the narrator’s inability to emotionally separate himself from the killing. The dead man becomes a permanent presence in his memory. The narrator does not engage in ordinary conversation with the other soldiers; instead, he remains physically and emotionally fixed on the body. His silence and repetition suggest a mind unable to move beyond the event. The narrator’s imagination also reveals the moral consequences of recognizing the enemy’s humanity. The Vietnamese man is no longer an abstract military target. He becomes a person with a history and possible future. This recognition transforms the act of killing into a source of guilt and grief. In “Good Form,” O’Brien further complicates the relationship between factual and emotional truth. The narrator suggests that literal details may differ while the emotional reality of guilt remains significant. Whether or not he physically killed the man, he was present, and that presence becomes morally meaningful. The distinction between physical action and moral participation is central to the novel’s treatment of responsibility.

Fear, Guilt, and Shame

Fear is a constant emotional presence in the novel. Soldiers fear death, injury, failure, humiliation, and abandonment. However, military culture expects them to appear courageous and emotionally controlled. The conflict between internal fear and external performance creates shame. The soldiers fear not only dying but also being seen as afraid. This fear of judgment influences their actions and prevents them from openly discussing their emotional states. In this sense, shame operates before, during, and after combat. It influences the decision to enter the war, the need to perform bravery in battle, and the silence that follows the return home. The soldiers sometimes use humor to manage fear. Jokes and teasing create temporary distance from violence and death. However, humor cannot remove the underlying trauma. It provides a coping mechanism, but it does not resolve guilt or grief. Guilt appears through several characters. Lieutenant Cross feels responsible for Ted Lavender’s death because he believes that his thoughts about Martha distracted him. The narrator experiences guilt regarding the Vietnamese man. Norman Bowker experiences guilt surrounding Kiowa’s death. These examples demonstrate that soldiers may blame themselves even when events are beyond their complete control. Guilt becomes a form of psychological burden that continues long after physical danger has ended. Field (2020) connects this suffering with the soldierly code of silence and duty. The soldiers are expected to perform their roles without openly discussing emotional vulnerability. As a result, the code that supports military discipline may prevent psychological recovery after combat.

Grief and Loss

Grief extends beyond the death of individual soldiers. The characters also lose relationships, innocence, moral certainty, and parts of their former identities. War creates a permanent division

between the person a soldier was before combat and the person who returns afterward. Kiowa's death produces collective grief within the platoon. The soldiers remember him through fragments of memory, including his voice, belongings, religious faith, and the place where he died. His death affects each soldier differently, but all are forced to confront the fragility of life. The story of Linda expands the meaning of grief beyond the Vietnam War. Linda's death from cancer becomes connected with the narrator's understanding of memory and storytelling. Although Linda dies during the narrator's childhood, she remains part of his imaginative and emotional life. Through stories, the dead can continue to exist symbolically. Storytelling cannot restore a dead person physically, but it can preserve the person's presence in memory. The narrator's stories therefore function as acts of mourning. They also create an ethical obligation to remember those who cannot speak for themselves. However, the novel does not suggest that storytelling completely eliminates grief. The continued repetition of painful memories demonstrates that narration can preserve suffering as well as manage it. The dead remain alive in stories, but their continued presence also reminds the narrator of loss.

Memory and Storytelling

Memory in *The Things They Carried* is unstable and active. O'Brien does not present the past as a fixed collection of facts. Instead, events are repeatedly reconstructed, revised, and retold. The distinction between "happening-truth" and "story-truth" is central to this process. "Happeningtruth" refers to literal events, whereas "story-truth" communicates the emotional meaning of an experience. This distinction allows O'Brien to explore the limitations of factual representation. A traumatic event may be factually difficult to reconstruct, but its emotional consequences may remain extremely clear. The narrator may change the details of the Vietnamese man's death, yet guilt and responsibility remain central in every version. The emotional truth therefore becomes more important than a simple factual record. Hassebrock and Boyle (2009) argue that the narrator's memories help construct his identity. The act of remembering becomes an act of self-interpretation. Through storytelling, the narrator attempts to understand whether he was a coward, a soldier, a killer, a survivor, or a witness. Storytelling consequently becomes a form of psychological survival. By telling and retelling the past, the narrator attempts to connect past and present. Stories give shape to experiences that otherwise remain fragmented and emotionally overwhelming. Recent work on narrative therapy similarly suggests that the act of retelling can help individuals reorganize painful experience without pretending that the past has disappeared (D'Souza & Menon, 2025).

Fragmented Narrative Form

The fragmented structure of the novel reflects the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The book does not follow a simple chronological structure. Instead, events are repeated, interrupted, reconsidered, and presented from different perspectives.

"How to Tell a True War Story" directly challenges the expectation that a war story should provide a clear moral lesson. O'Brien presents war as contradictory, ambiguous, violent, beautiful, and absurd. A true war story may not contain a simple message or a clear distinction between good and evil. This narrative strategy is important because trauma itself often resists neat organization. The fragmented structure is therefore more than a stylistic choice; it represents the psychological difficulty of organizing traumatic experience. The stories also create a relationship between form and content. Because the soldiers cannot fully organize their memories, the narrative refuses to organize war into a simple story of progress, victory, or moral resolution. The reader experiences uncertainty because uncertainty is part of the soldiers' experience.

Moral Suffering and Responsibility

War creates moral problems because soldiers are placed in situations where ordinary ethical choices become extremely difficult. They must obey orders, survive, kill, and make decisions involving the lives of others. The narrator's response to the Vietnamese man illustrates this moral suffering. He cannot simply classify the dead man as an enemy. He imagines his life and recognizes his humanity. This recognition produces a burden of responsibility that extends beyond military language. Similarly, Lieutenant Cross feels responsible for Lavender's death even though he could not completely control the circumstances. The soldiers' guilt demonstrates the psychological consequences of feeling responsible for events that occur during combat. O'Brien therefore shows that war can damage not only the body but also moral identity. Soldiers must live with the knowledge that they have participated in violence, even when they acted under orders or in selfdefence. The result is a form of suffering that cannot be easily recognized through physical examination. Dhobi's (2025) discussion of power imbalance is useful here because it directs attention to the structures that place soldiers and civilians in unequal positions. Military authority transforms individual people into categories and assigns responsibility through hierarchy. Yet O'Brien's characters continue to experience personal guilt, showing that institutional explanations do not eliminate individual moral pain.

Difficulty of Returning Home

The psychological effects of war continue after soldiers return to civilian life.

Norman Bowker's story is central to this theme.

After returning home, Bowker drives around his town but struggles to reconnect with civilian society. He wants to talk about Kiowa but feels that nobody will understand what he experienced. His movement around the town symbolizes emotional restlessness. Although he is physically home, he remains psychologically connected to Vietnam. Bowker's father is interested in medals and achievements, whereas Bowker's emotional experience is dominated by guilt and failure. This difference demonstrates the gap between heroic public narratives and the private experiences of veterans.

Bowker's isolation suggests that returning home does not automatically mean recovering from war. Physical distance from the battlefield does not remove psychological memories. Al-Masoudi (2023) similarly emphasizes that post-traumatic memories and guilt prevent veterans from fully resuming ordinary social life. The story also demonstrates the importance of communication and social recognition. Bowker needs someone who will listen to his experience, but he cannot find an appropriate audience. His suffering is intensified because civilian society lacks the language and willingness to receive his memories.

Power, Gender, and the Limits of Representation

Although the book focuses primarily on male soldiers, its representation of war also raises questions about gender and power. Women such as Martha and Linda are not soldiers, yet they function as powerful figures in the narrator's emotional world. Martha represents an imagined civilian life that remains inaccessible to Lieutenant Cross, while Linda becomes connected with memory, death, and the possibility of symbolic survival. The treatment of women reveals the limitations of the soldiers' perspectives. Women are frequently remembered through the emotional needs of male characters rather than represented as fully independent subjects. Martha's distance, for example, allows Cross to project his desires and frustrations onto her. This does not mean that women are unimportant; rather, it shows how war distorts relationships and turns absent people into objects of memory. A power-based reading also draws attention to the Vietnamese characters

who appear through American soldiers' perceptions. The narrator's imaginative reconstruction of the Vietnamese man attempts to restore his humanity, but the man does not receive an independent voice. O'Brien therefore exposes both the ethical necessity and the difficulty of representing those affected by violence from outside their experience.

Resilience Without Romanticizing Recovery

The novel contains forms of resilience, but it does not present recovery as simple or complete. The soldiers continue walking, remembering, joking, writing, and telling stories. These actions indicate that they develop ways of living with trauma. However, continued survival should not be confused with emotional healing. The narrator's storytelling is a form of resilience because it transforms private memories into a public narrative. By writing about the dead, he resists the disappearance of their lives. He also creates a relationship with readers who become witnesses to experiences that civilian society may otherwise ignore. At the same time, the repeated return to painful memories indicates that resilience remains uncertain. The narrator does not achieve a final resolution. Instead, he continues to carry the past. Punia's (2026) emphasis on resilience is valuable when understood as the capacity to continue meaning-making in the presence of suffering, rather than as the complete removal of trauma.

The Human Cost of War

The human cost of war extends far beyond battlefield deaths. War affects bodies, memories, relationships, identities, moral beliefs, and emotional lives.

O'Brien presents his soldiers as complex human beings. They can be courageous and frightened, compassionate and selfish, humorous and deeply traumatized. Such contradictions make their experiences more realistic and undermine simplified representations of military character. The novel also gives attention, although primarily from the perspective of American soldiers, to Vietnamese victims of violence. The imagined Vietnamese man in "The Man I Killed" becomes particularly significant because the narrator recognizes him as a human being rather than merely an enemy. Through this humanization, O'Brien challenges language that reduces people to military categories such as "enemy," "target," or "casualty." The novel ultimately asks readers to consider what warfare does to human beings on all sides.

Findings

The analysis produces several major findings. First, *The Things They Carried* represents war as a source of physical, psychological, and moral suffering rather than simply as an experience of heroism. The text presents fear and uncertainty as central parts of military experience and rejects the idea that courage eliminates vulnerability. Second, the physical objects carried by the soldiers function as symbols of invisible emotional burdens. Weapons and equipment represent the material demands of war, while letters, photographs, and personal objects connect soldiers to fear, love, memory, and responsibility. The title therefore provides the central metaphor through which material and psychological suffering become connected. Third, trauma continues after combat. The experiences of the narrator and Norman Bowker demonstrate that leaving Vietnam does not mean leaving the war psychologically. Memories continue to shape identity, relationships, and the ability to participate in civilian life. Fourth, guilt and shame are major forms of suffering. Soldiers frequently blame themselves for deaths and events that they could not completely control. The novel presents guilt as a moral response to violence, but also as a burden intensified by unrealistic expectations of military responsibility. Fifth, memory is fragmented and repetitive. O'Brien's repeated retelling of particular events demonstrates how traumatic experiences remain

psychologically unresolved. Narrative fragmentation is therefore not merely an artistic technique; it represents the structure of traumatic memory. Sixth, storytelling functions as a way of preserving memory and communicating suffering. Although storytelling cannot erase trauma or bring back the dead, it gives survivors a means of expressing experiences that might otherwise remain silent. Stories create an ethical relationship between the survivor, the dead, and the reader. Finally, the novel demonstrates that the human cost of war extends beyond physical death. War can permanently alter identity, relationships, moral beliefs, memory, and the ability to reconnect with civilian society. Recent studies concerning power, narrative therapy, and resilience support the continuing relevance of these findings (Dhobi, 2025; D'Souza & Menon, 2025; Punia, 2026).

Conclusion

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* presents war as a continuing experience of physical, psychological, and moral suffering. Through the symbolic weight of objects, the novel demonstrates that soldiers carry much more than weapons and military equipment. They carry fear, grief, guilt, shame, loneliness, responsibility, and memories of violence. The novel challenges heroic representations of war by showing that soldiers may participate because of fear, social pressure, duty, or the desire to avoid shame rather than because of a simple belief in patriotic ideals. Characters such as Lieutenant Cross, Norman Bowker, and the narrator demonstrate the complicated emotional consequences of combat. O'Brien's fragmented narrative structure strengthens the representation of trauma. Events are repeatedly remembered, revised, and retold, reflecting the unstable nature of traumatic memory. His distinction between factual and emotional truth suggests that the deepest reality of war may not always be communicated through literal facts alone. Storytelling becomes an important response to suffering. Through stories, the narrator preserves the memory of those who died and attempts to understand experiences that remain unresolved. However, storytelling does not completely cure trauma. The dead cannot return, guilt cannot simply disappear, and the past cannot be erased. Ultimately, *The Things They Carried* demonstrates that war continues long after the battlefield has disappeared. The soldiers carry physical objects during combat, but their most enduring burdens are invisible: the memories of the dead, the guilt of survival, the experience of violence, and the knowledge that war has permanently changed their understanding of themselves and the world.

References

- Al-Masoudi, R. S. S. (2023). Posttraumatic memories and feelings of guilt in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Al-Adab Journal*, 145, 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v1i145.3921>
- Caruth, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dhobi, S. (2025). Interrogating representation of power imbalance in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Pursuits*, 9(1), 113–122. <https://doi.org/10.3126/pursuits.v9i1.79376>
- D'Souza, A., & Menon, R. (2025). Narrative therapy in Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Journal of War and Literature*, 4(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2025.2525629>
- Field, J. C. (2020). The soldierly code: War trauma and coping in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Scientia et Humanitas*, 10. <https://libjournals.mtsu.edu/index.php/scientia/article/view/1795>

- Freud, S. (1955). Beyond the pleasure principle. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 18, pp. 1–64). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1920)
- Hassebrock, F., & Boyle, B. (2009). Memory and narrative: Reading *The Things They Carried* for psyche and persona. *Across the Disciplines*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2009.6.3.20>
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- O'Brien, T. (1990). *The things they carried*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Punia, S. (2023). (Re)presenting war: A study of resilience in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(3). <https://www.ijfmr.com/research-paper.php?id=4075>
- Punia, S. (2026). (Re)presenting war: A study of resilience in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(4). <https://www.ijfmr.com/research-paper.php?id=4075>
- Tal, K. (1996). *Worlds of hurt: Reading the literatures of trauma*. Cambridge University Press.
- Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Young, A. (1995). *The harmony of illusions: Inventing post-traumatic stress disorder*. Princeton University Press.