

Introduction: Tim O'Brien wrote the short story collection: *The Things They Carried*, approximately 20 years after his experiences at the Vietnam War. His collection of Vietnam War stories stood out for me because O'Brien is more interested in subverting the status quo of traditional Vietnam stories, so it isn't just a typical shoot'em up collection. I also liked O'Brien's intimate describing of his experiences, and how his stories all have interesting elements to them because he was a soldier of the Vietnam War. We read about his stories in first person, which makes it appear simple on the surface, yet it still contains complex and structured ideas. These ideas derived from O'Brien's own encounters with the chaotic struggle he faced in Vietnam. From O'Brien's collection, I chose 'The Things They Carried', 'On The Rainy River', 'The Dentist', and 'Enemies And Friends'. I chose these because they all revolve around a similar idea: Conflict. Although these stories obviously contain physical conflict, it is the internal and external conflict that O'Brien is attempting to display. Whether this is the conflict of morals seen in 'On The Rainy River' or the struggle to retain sanity displayed in 'The Things They Carried', *O'Brien is suggesting to society that war is destructive, both physically and, more importantly, psychologically. O'Brien is asking society why do we send young men to their deaths? And are we, as a cultured and sophisticated society benefiting from exploiting the young to do our dirty work?* (1)

Conflict corrupts our morality: Our morality is something that we hope to be universal: right and wrong, good and bad. But when put into a position that is out of our control, these morals that we value so highly, vanish. The division line between what we think is right and wrong, good and bad, dramatically shifts, and alters our beloved morals. For many, the Vietnam War had blurred what they have been taught about social orders. Vietnam forced soldiers to act in ways that were morally unjust. The ones that went there to spread their ideals ended up being warped and destructive. 'Enemies and Friends' is Tim O'Brien's explanation to society proving how chaotic settings deform people's social codes. Two, once ordinary men, who are supposed to be fighting the 'enemy', act violently towards each other over a missing jack knife. This fight results in Dave Jensen becoming incredibly frightened of Lee Strunk, as Lee had won the fight. *The extreme conditions of war caused these men to disregard the distinction between Enemy and Friend. We see how fast Dave and Lee's principles disappear in this distant and disorderly world, where they can make the rules* (2). As O'Brien identified, that "in any other circumstance it might 've ended there. But this was Vietnam". We, as readers, can clearly see how this fight is a *microcosm of the conflict surrounding them. The macrocosm, war, is clearly creating many opportunities for naive men just like Lee and Dave to destroy their morals and lash out on their friends and teammates. Many ended up confused as "the distinction between good guys and bad guys disappeared"* (2). As a society, we picture these heroic figures that are united in fighting a common enemy. Yet, *O'Brien purposely subverts the genre of ironic war stories to display the truth in war.* (2) Similarly, we see in 'The Dentist' how this external conflict creates immense internal conflict. O'Brien displays this through Curt Lemon, who "had a tendency to play the tough soldier role" Curt loved to be seen as the best the toughest; the strongest. When he faints from fright at a routine dentist check, everything he is driven by is destroyed. He seeks redemption, which comes by him demanding to have one of his perfectly normal teeth pulled out. The embarrassment and surrounding destruction had "turned a screw in his head" resulting in him transforming into something many didn't respect. O'Brien saw how Curt had disregarded his morals for what he believed was a higher cause: his status. Curt was willing to do anything to redeem himself. This thing that he had become was largely influenced by his setting. *The on-going conflict around him had blinded Curt by distorting his perception of right and wrong* (2). The war had obviously had its toll on Curt so much so that he was eager to put himself in pain to redeem himself.

Aside from the conflict that was dominated by Vietnam, 'On the Rainy River' is O'Brien displaying how conflict can corrupt our morality. This short story shows us the young and naive Tim O'Brien who finds out he has been drafted for war. He is torn over what to do: fight or flight? O'Brien clearly displays how he doesn't agree with the motives of the war and how it goes against what he believes in. It is a question of what is he more afraid of, fighting society or fighting his morals? Although O'Brien may have gone to fight in the Vietnam war, it is something that he still has to bear as "I felt ashamed to be doing the right thing". *O'Brien wants us to understand the war wasn't about you; it was about a service to a larger community which blurred out your individuals morals and desires. It is evident that conflict corrupts our morality* (3), as we have seen this through 'Enemies and Friends', 'The Dentist' and 'On the Rainy River'. *All three texts display that our morality is malleable-when we are faced with the extremities of chaos and conflict* (5). O'Brien displays the idea of conflict corrupting morality by not writing a typical shoot'em up short story collection, but instead writing an insightful window into the emotion lives many soldiers lived, not just in Alpha Company, but that all soldiers in the Vietnam War endured. *O'Brien purposely crafts a story, which is very intricate in describing the things that are far more devastating than simple facts. By reading we can understand how honour wasn't a part of their lives, as we see how conflict has warped these once ordinary men. O'Brien is suggesting to society*

that how can we expect men to return in the same mental state as when they left, when war itself is immoral.(3)

War puts unnecessary burdens on people: When the Vietnam War broke out, it instantly carried with it a massive burden for individuals. Thousands had to put aside their hopes and dreams to fight in a distant land for ideas that many didn't agree with. Like O'Brien, many went reluctantly and have been burdened with the experience of knowing they went against their morals. The Vietnam war left the physical, but also its psychological impact that many haven't recovered from. Many wanted to get away, but felt trapped. This idea is displayed in 'The Things They Carried'. O'Brien presents us with many of his friends who, aside from carrying heavy loads, also carry much heavier burdens, such as "grief, terror, love and longing." They all had their individual reminders to escape these burdens, whether this was in the form of a good luck pebble, girlfriend's pantyhose or the letters of a secret love. Many carried these special items to remind them that a better world exists outside of the one they are currently enduring. A lot of these men didn't choose to be there, so they needed these items to remind them what they were fighting for: freedom. It reminded them that they weren't just soldiers, but humans too. This story also explains how men were burdened with the decision to kill or be humiliated. We see how "men killed and died because they were embarrassed not to. It is what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honour, just to avoid the blush of dishonour." Many felt no honour in killing and fighting in the war was ignoble. *O'Brien wants us to understand that they were ordinary young men who had more to live for than to die in an undignified place where they would be quickly forgotten* (4). When Tim O'Brien found out he had been drafted for war in 'On the Rainy River', his world turned upside down. At first he was confused, saying "I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything". *O'Brien believed he, like many others, had too much to live for to go fight in the war. He felt that he shouldn't have put aside everything he had hoped for in life just to fight in a war that he didn't believe in* (4). The burden the Vietnam had created for O'Brien had later caused him to become temporally mentally unstable. O'Brien felt the war wasn't necessary, and shouldn't dictate how he and others should live life. But in the end, O'Brien "would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die - because I was embarrassed not to" Many men at the time endured the same struggle as O'Brien, and were burdened with knowing their decision ultimately went against their morals. Similarly, we see in 'Enemies & Friends' how the soldiers are burdened with the unknown. The feeling of not knowing if they would die and feeling insecure of their futures is what led many men to lash out in anger. The stress of not knowing what lay ahead built up immense internal conflict which led men to explode in violent rages. O'Brien witnessed how his 'friends' would fight their own 'friends' causing them to fear each other. Ironically, this led to more men being burdened with the fact they had made enemies with members of their platoon. Because, as O'Brien explained: "this was Vietnam, where guys carried guns". The war had inevitably forced men to commit acts that they wouldn't normally carry out. And this was displayed in O'Brien's example where Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk fight, resulting in Dave being crazed by apprehension. This would have been the case throughout the Vietnam War, where men lashed out, because of the strain and tension war creates. O'Brien has shown us through these three texts how war puts unnecessary burdens on people. As we can tell, the nature of war brings with it the extreme decisions ordinary men had to face: kill or be killed. *But when society collectively agrees so strongly that killing is wrong, what are we teaching impressionable young men about right and wrong? Killing is bad but only sometimes? What happens if these men return back into society, to try and restart what they had left behind? Many found it difficult to integrate, as all they knew was how to kill and shoot a rifle.* O'Brien is clearly suggesting to the readers and society that we aren't as civilised as we think if we are still creating these burdens for young soldiers (4).

[Extreme conditions reveal our true colours – deleted]

Conclusion: Tim O'Brien's short story collection was focused around conflict and how it affects us as individuals. We see how he describes war as destructive and something that shouldn't be viewed as noble and heroic. War can too easily corrupt impressionable men by destroying their morality and creating unwanted burdens. We also read how the extreme conditions of war warped men into something self destructive. *O'Brien wants to challenge society's mindset revolving around the topic of war by questioning why we continue to shatter men's lives by ordering them to do things we deem wrong in society, such as killing.* It is clear that all the men listed in these short stories have lived broken lives after the war, *which in the eyes of O'Brien is the most immoral thing society has achieved* (4).