

Note: This is a different assignment than this year!

Student Name

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AP English Language & Composition

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The Weight of Fear

In the short story “The Things They Carried” from the book The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brien teaches us that baggage can be real or imagined and sometimes it is those imagined burdens that weigh us down the most. By examining the style of a passage from this story, the reader becomes aware of how the writer’s choices work to show the side of a soldier’s life rarely discussed. Through his frank handling of a soldier’s fear and its repercussions, O’Brien presents an honest look at the emotions carried by soldiers every day they are at war.

O’Brien effectively utilizes understatement with the line “They were tough” (21). This telegraphic sentence describes the outward appearance we associate with soldiers. We think they are tough, because they look and act tough. This is a literal statement that does not surprise the reader. However, O’Brien delves deeper into the soldiers’ personalities with figurative language, for example, with the metaphorical “emotional baggage” which the men carry. It is with this figurative idea that he builds the rest of the passage. Together with all of the physical things the men must carry with them, they are weighed down by “Grief, terror, love, longing.” These

abstractions are earned by the writer. He describes in profound detail all of the physical items the men carry, and it is because of the terrible weight of these things that the emotional baggage exists. He talks of these concepts as “intangibles...[that] had tangible weight.” Some of these intangibles are shame and cowardice. Another intangible is the instinct “to run or freeze or hide” which is made all the more powerful by the writer’s use of polysyndeton, repeating the conjunction “or” to remind us how desperate the men feel. To a soldier, the constant weight of being thought a coward weighs on one’s mind. The alliteration of “carried the common secret of cowardice” makes this line stand out. Carrying this burden is the hardest of all; because it requires “perfect balance and perfect posture.” It is an awkward burden to carry, this cowardice, because it must be carried invisibly.

O’Brien bluntly states “Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to.” The contrast between being embarrassed and killing is a drastic one, making this example of antithesis stand out all the more. Men seek to avoid “the blush of dishonor” – suggesting the all too familiar feeling of heat on one’s face. In this case though, that blush is reserved for those that did not go to war. Playing on the idea of dying of embarrassment, O’Brien is not making a joke here though. Their deaths are honorable, but also a last ditch effort to retain some semblance of honor in the face of fear.

Simple details about the life of a soldier, “crawl[ing] into tunnels...walk[ing] point...advance[ing] under fire” bring the narrative back to the mundane details that make up a soldier’s typical day. A telegraphic two-word sentence “They endured” echoes the statement about toughness that precedes the passage. It tells so much with an economy of words. Enduring is a decision, as the “alternative” would be to “close the eyes and fall”. O’Brien’s colloquial “So easy, really” sounds conversational and intimate. Here we are getting a glimpse into the dark

recesses of the soldiers' struggle. Why not just give up? Why endure? As the reader is lulled into the pattern of the sentence that follows, we are "caught" by the writer's use of language. O'Brien tells us that it was "A mere matter of falling, yet no one ever fell." His meaning is clear: although the alternative exists, the fear of being thought a coward is far too great. O'Brien reminds the reader that it is "not courage, exactly" that makes the men continue "humping" their heavy burdens day in and day out. It is a tangible feeling of fear – so complete that it sustains them every single day and lends the power to endure.

By examining this passage from "The Things They Carried", the reader is given an intimate look into a soldier's emotional life through all he carries. O'Brien writes "they were too frightened to be cowards" and with this paradoxical statement he sheds light on the honesty with which the men carry their burdens. Being a coward is a luxury that a soldier can never afford.