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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a book. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. Literature often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

The Things They Carried explores the social pressures the soldiers faced, both in choosing whether or not to serve in Vietnam and in the way they conducted themselves while on patrol. It also examines each soldier's personal moral code and, more subtly, the politics surrounding the Vietnam War. Throughout the book, O'Brien challenges the reader to consider what constitutes truth and whether a well-told story can transcend the limits of fiction.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Discuss the themes identified during the previous night's homework. Then, as a writing assignment or group activity, explore the following themes:

Social Pressure

Many of the soldiers' actions are the result of social pressure: O'Brien's unwillingness to dodge the draft by fleeing to Canada even though he opposed the war, the dark humor the unit displays in the villages, and the fact that they would kill and die "because they were embarrassed not to" (p. 21). Ask your class to identify instances where social pressure affects a character or the unit as a whole. Is this pressure positive or is it a negative influence? Have students support their answers with passages from the text.

Personal Moral Code

Divide students into small working groups. Assign each group a character and ask them to write a short analysis of the character's individual moral code by quoting passages from the book. Have each group share its findings. How do the characters' morals differ from one another? How are they the same?

Truth

O'Brien plays with the line between fact and fiction throughout the book. "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened . . . and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (p. 158). Ask your class to discuss ways O'Brien blurs the lines between reality and imagination. How does this contribute to our understanding of the war?



Homework

Read "Night Life" and "The Lives of the Dead" (pp. 219-246).