Senior English Guided Reading Questions

*The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien

Tim O’Brien was drafted and served in the Vietnam War, a war he opposed, until he was wounded and received the Purple Heart. Although he draws from his experiences in *The Things They Carried*, it is not nonfiction; it is a novel made up of stories that can each stand on its own. The stories are not in chronological order, but they are linked with the same characters, objects, and events.

**Directions**

Read the whole book, but you should focus your attention on the stories that have questions below. Remember that your book belongs to you—it will help you better understand and keep track of what you read if you underline or bracket things that seem important or that interest you.

- Carefully read the directions for each story. My commentary on the stories is intended to help you understand them more completely. Answer the questions on notebook paper, or you may type your answers. Be sure to use complete sentences and explain your answers in full.
  - **Note:** Any plagiarized work will receive a 0 and cannot be redone.

- Fill out your **Character List** of the soldiers of Alpha Company, beginning with the first story, and add to it as you read the other stories. This will help you keep the characters straight and get to know them better. Be sure to include page numbers.
Guided Reading Questions

“The Things They Carried,” page 1

This first story, written from the point of view of a third person narrator, can seem hard to read because it is full of lists—things the soldiers carried because they needed them, because of their rank, because of the mission they were on, because of their superstitions, because of their fear of dying. But what they carry tells us not just about the individual soldiers in Alpha Company but also about the human experience in general.

Don’t get bogged down in the lists. Focus on what you see that you expect to see, but then note what items are surprising or unexpected.

• Begin filling out your *The Things They Carried* Character List. You should add to it from every story that you read, but you will learn a lot that is important in this first story.

• What were three interesting or surprising items on lists in this story? Record each item and explain in detail why it interested you.

• In this story, Lt Cross can think of nothing but Martha, a girl from home that he loves (who probably does not love him.) Why does Jimmy burn Martha’s letters and blame himself for Ted Lavender’s death?

“Love,” page 26

• This is the first of the first-person narrator stories. What does Tim find about what happened between Jimmy and Martha?

• At the end of this story, Jimmy asks Tim not to “mention anything about----“. What do you think Jimmy was referring to? You may not be sure about the answer to this question until after you have read other stories in the book.

“On the Rainy River,” page 37

This story is set before the narrator Tim goes to Vietnam. It traces his reaction to getting his draft notice, working at a disgusting job while he tries to process what is happening to him, and then finally deciding to run away to Canada.

• Explain in your words Tim’s experience with the “hero of his life,” Elroy Berdahl.
• This story considers the way **fear of shame** causes Tim to make certain decisions. Explain what Tim means in the last sentence when he says, “I **was a coward. I went to the war.**”

**“The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,”** page 85

This is a **fantastical** story that Rat tells and swears is true, about a soldier named Mark Fossie who arranges for his girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, to come visit him from Ohio. Over time, though, Mary Anne incredibly transforms into a predator.

• Tell the story of Mary Anne’s transformation. Add her and her “object” to your Character List.

**“Speaking of Courage,”** page 131

A third-person narrator tells the heartbreaking story of Norman Bowker, a gentle, decent soldier who cannot find a place in the world back home because he is haunted by his role in his best friend Kiowa’s death.

• In about 10 sentences and using your own words, tell the story of Norman Bowker, both back home in Iowa and in the “sh—t field” in Vietnam.

**“Notes,”** page 149

• What does the narrator Tim tells us about the fate of Norman Bowker? What shocking detail does Tim reveal at the end of the story?

**“Into the Field,”** page 155

This is one of the most troubling stories in the book, the story of the death of Kiowa, the soldier they all loved. At the end of the story, Jimmy Cross remarks that “[w]hen a man died, there had to be blame.”

• What happened to Kiowa, and which soldiers think they are to blame? Who do you think was to blame?

**“Good Form,”** page 171

A short but powerful chapter that **reminds us that this book is fiction, but even within that we can’t tell for sure what is real.** Tim the narrator states: “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.”

• Summarize in a few sentences the main points of this story.
“Field Trip,” page 173

The title of this story has a double meaning: the “field trip” the narrator Tim makes to Vietnam with his daughter Kathleen, and Tim’s trip back to the field where his friend Kiowa died.

- What happens when Tim returns to the field, and what are Kathleen’s impressions?

“The Ghost Soldiers,” page 181

This story shows a very different side of the narrator Tim. He is filled with hatred and wants revenge against the young medic Bobby Jorgensen, who mishandled his getting shot.

- Explain Tim’s injury (some of the description comes later in the story). Then explain how Tim attempts to get back at Bobby. Who else is involved? Is Tim’s plot successful, Perhaps most important to the story—how does Bobby react?

“Lives of the Dead,” page 213

This last story begins with the line, “But this too is true: stories can save us.” Tim first tells us about a dead body he and the rest of Alpha Company found when he was new to Vietnam. This reminds him of seeing his first love, Linda, who died of a brain tumor when they were nine.

- Tim as the adult narrator says that he wants to “save Linda’s life. Not her body—her life,” by telling the story of her death. In your own words, tell about Linda, her stocking cap, and her death.

- Tim and the other members of Alpha Company also “kept the dead alive with stories.” Tell one of the stories they told about one of their dead comrades.

- The end of The Things They Carried would be difficult to summarize. What emotions or reactions do you have when reading the last few pages of the book? Be sure to refer to specific details from the book to support your views.
# The Things They Carried Character List

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier</th>
<th>Object/s carried</th>
<th>What object symbolizes or its significance</th>
<th>Soldier’s actions/characteristics</th>
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<td>Jimmy Cross</td>
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<td>Henry Dobbins</td>
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<td>Dave Jensen</td>
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<td>Ted Lavender</td>
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<td>Mitchell Saunders</td>
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<td>Norman Bowker</td>
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<td>Curt Lemon</td>
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<td>Kiowa</td>
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<td>Mary Ann Bell</td>
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<td>Tim O’Brien, narrator(a creation of Tim O'Brien the writer)</td>
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**Other notes or comments:**