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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the book. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Things They Carried was published in 1990, twenty years after Tim O'Brien returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam. By most estimates nearly 9 million men served in the military between 1964 and 1975. Of that number, approximately 3.5 million men served in the Vietnam theatre of operations. The draft called more than 2 million men for military service during the Vietnam era. It has also been credited with “encouraging” many volunteers to join the armed services rather than risk being drafted into combat.



Discussion Activities

Read Handout Two: Conscription and the U.S. Draft and the Reader's Guide essay “The Vietnam War” (pp. 7-9). As a class, discuss the pros and cons of instituting a draft during a time of national crisis.

Using the homework assignment, make a list of items that the soldiers in the story carried. Ask your students the following questions: Which, if any, of the items is specific to the time period of the Vietnam War? Which items are timeless? Why might Tim O'Brien choose to give each man specific items in addition to the typical soldier's gear? What do the items tell us about each soldier's duties and personality? What do we learn about their hopes and desires?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to imagine that they are going to war and can only take three personal items. Have them write a short essay describing each item and the reason why they want to carry it.



Homework

Read “Love,” “Spin,” and “On the Rainy River” (pp. 27-61). Have students choose their favorite of the three stories and write a one-paragraph synopsis. Encourage them to think about the ways memory unites these stories.