The Things They Carried

“The Things They Carried”
1. How does the ambiguous nature of the term “carry” introduce the soldiers and the themes of the novel?
2. What does the fact that Lt. Jimmy Cross carries a picture of Martha reveal about his character?
3. What does the phrase “they searched the villages without knowing what to look for” reveal about the soldiers’ attitudes toward the war?
4. How does Kiowa react to Lavender’s death?
5. How does the phrase, “men killed, and died, because they were too embarrassed not to” explicate the theme of shame and guilt?

“Love”
1. How does the narrative viewpoint change at the onset of this chapter?
2. Why has Jimmy Cross never forgiven himself for Lavender’s death?
3. What request does Jimmy Cross express as he is leaving O’Brien’s home? What does his request reveal about his character?

“Spin”
1. Why did O’Brien and the other soldiers enjoy watching Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins play checkers?
2. Why does O’Brien present the ideas in this chapter in separate, almost disconnected and fragmented sections?

“On the Rainy River”
1. What is O’Brien suggesting when he describes himself as having had “a modest stand against the war”?
2. How is his ambivalence intensified after he receives his draft notice?
3. What does O’Brien mean when he says he “was too good for this war”?
4. What is ironic about the feeling of isolation O’Brien experiences the summer of his draft notice?
5. How does O’Brien develop the theme of shame in the chapter?
6. What is the effect of O’Brien’s directly addressing the reader at the end of this chapter?

“Enemies”
1. Why does Jensen claim that there are “enemies everywhere”?
2. How does Dave Jensen’s reaction exemplify the fragile psychology of Vietnam soldiers?

“Friends”
1. Why has O’Brien placed this chapter immediately after the previous chapter “Enemies”? What is the connection between the chapters?
2. What does the arrangement between Strunk and Jensen reveal about the soldiers in the platoon? What does the fact that Strunk begs Jensen not to fulfill his part of the agreement reveal about Jensen? About soldiers in general?
3. Why do Strunk and Jensen enter into their pact in the first place? Why does Strunk want to rescind the pact when he is injured?
4. Why is Jensen “relieved” to hear that Strunk has died?

“How to Tell a True War Story”
1. How does the chapter develop the theme of truth versus fiction?
2. Why does O’Brien insist that war stories are not moral?
3. Why does O’Brien try to reconstruct what Lemon must have experienced the moment of his death?
4. How does O’Brien use levels of language to illustrate the soldiers’ experiences and attitudes?
5. According to O’Brien, why is it difficult or impossible to generalize about war?

“The Dentist”
1. Why does O’Brien feel the need to tell the story of Curt Lemon and the dentist?
2. What is ironic about Lemon’s incident with the dentist? Would the irony have been as strong if O’Brien had placed this anecdote before the chapter describing Lemon’s death?
3. Why does Curt Lemon ask the dentist to pull his healthy tooth? How does his request illustrate the theme of shame?

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”
1. What is Rat Kiley’s typical way of telling a story?
2. What is the significance of Mary Anne’s transformation? What does it say about Mark Fossie and the other soldiers?
3. Why does O’Brien allow the story of Mary Anne to be told by a man who is known for his exaggeration and admits that he only heard this story second- or third-hand?

“Stockings”
1. Thematically, why does O’Brien place this chapter immediately after the previous one?
2. How does the notion of superstition mirror what O’Brien has been proposing as his notion of truth?

“Church”
1. Why does Kiowa come to believe that it is wrong to set up camp in the church?

“The Man I Killed”
1. Why does O’Brien emphasize that the man he killed was not a Communist but “a citizen and a soldier”?
2. Why does Kiowa send Azar away?
3. Why does O’Brien explain that the dead Vietnamese soldier was “afraid of disgracing himself . . . his family and village”?

“Ambush”
1. How does the narrative technique, the way the paragraphs are structured in this chapter, contribute to the themes of the novel?

“Style”
1. What kind of literary device does the narrator use several times throughout this short
chapter to describe the scene in the village where the young girl is dancing? What effect is created with this device?

“Speaking of Courage”
1. What point of view is used to convey the events in “Speaking of Courage”?
2. What are the levels of “courage” to which the title of this vignette refers?
3. How does Norman Bowker experience his hometown after returning to it after the end of the War?
4. How is the 4th of July display described in the chapter an instance of irony?

“Notes”
1. How does this chapter build on the previous chapter’s theme of isolation and alienation?
2. How does the chapter contribute to the theme of guilt?

“In the Field”
1. Who is the predominant narrator in this chapter?
2. What is Azar’s coping mechanism for dealing with death?
3. What is the significance of the metaphor O’Brien uses to describe Jimmy Cross’s reaction to seeing his soldiers search for Kiowa’s body?
4. How does the chapter develop the themes of guilt and blame?
5. What other theme does O’Brien revisit in narrating Cross’s feelings on the morning after Kiowa’s death?

“Good Form”
1. What ultimately is the power of storytelling?

“Field Trip”
1. What is the significance of the title of this vignette?
2. Why does O’Brien take Kathleen to the scene of Kiowa’s death?
3. What is the significance of the simile O’Brien uses to explain his inability to move while standing in the field of mush?

“The Ghost Soldiers”
1. Why is O’Brien angry with Jorgenson?
2. What does O’Brien’s desire to hurt Jorgenson reveal about his development as a character?
3. What is significant about the fact that no one except Azar will help O’Brien with his plan for revenge?
4. What is the significance of O’Brien’s describing Azar’s holding his rifle “like a teddy bear”?

“Night Life”
1. What is the significance of wounding oneself in order to remove oneself from the war?
2. How do the men react to Rat Kiley’s injuring himself?

“The Lives of the Dead”
1. What metaphor does O’Brien use to describe his love for Linda?
2. How does the story of Linda relate to the rest of the novel?