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Where the Ground Was the Enemy: Setting as a Character in The Things They Carried

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Where the Ground Was the Enemy

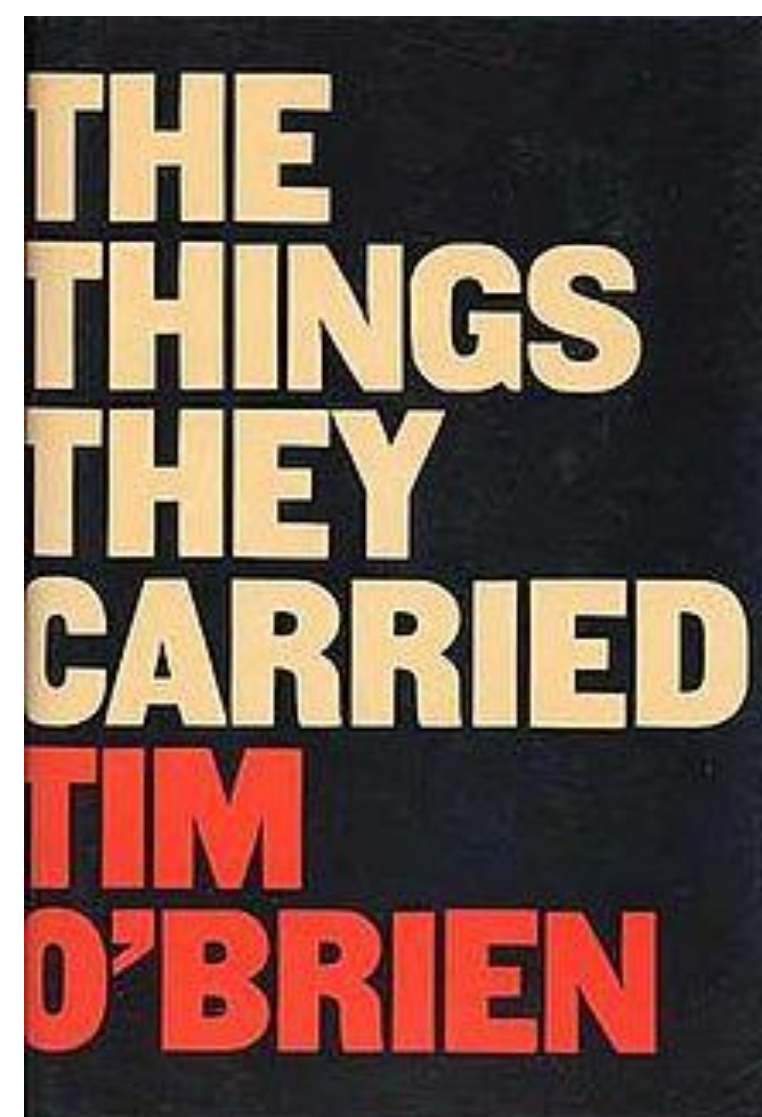
Setting as Character in *The Things They Carried*

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Introduction:

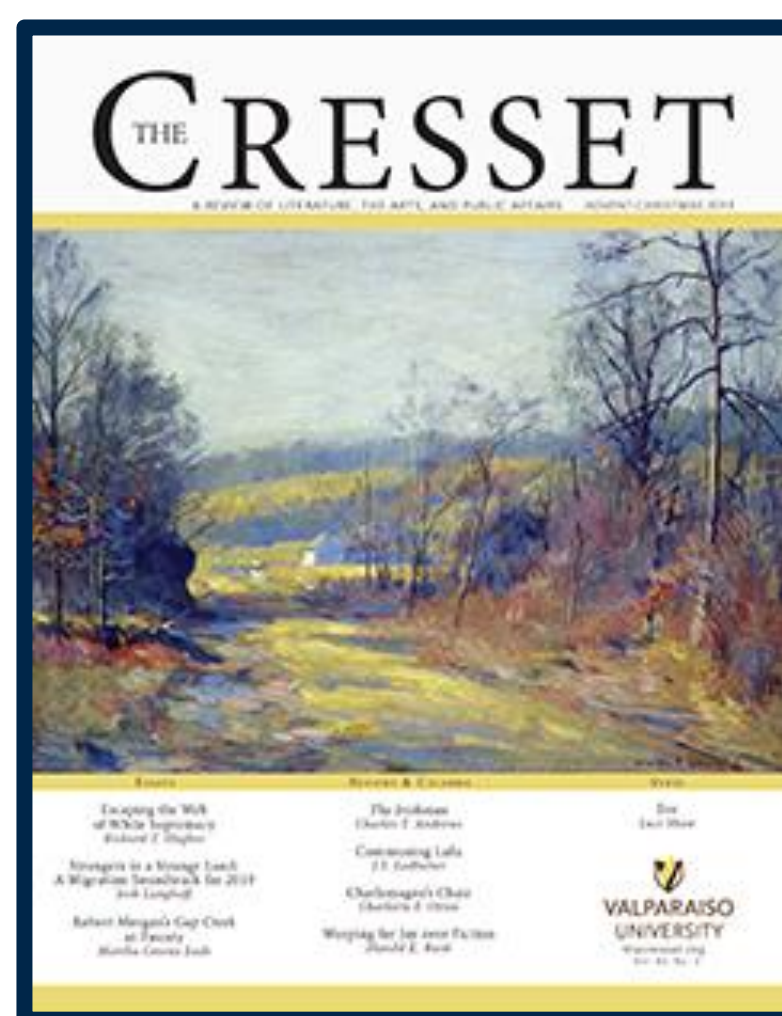
In the postmodern classic by Tim O'Brien, many critics have written and attempted to parse out questions based on the traditional elements of fiction: setting, character, plot, point of view, theme, and style. The setting, primarily in the Quang Ngai Province in Vietnam and the protagonist, is the narrator who shares the same name as the author. Yet, the antagonist was not so evident.



Thesis

In *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, the author so thoroughly personifies the land itself that it becomes a character and more specifically becomes the primary antagonist faced by the narrator and his comrades.

Publication:



This article is published in *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*. The article was published in December, 2019, Advent Edition.



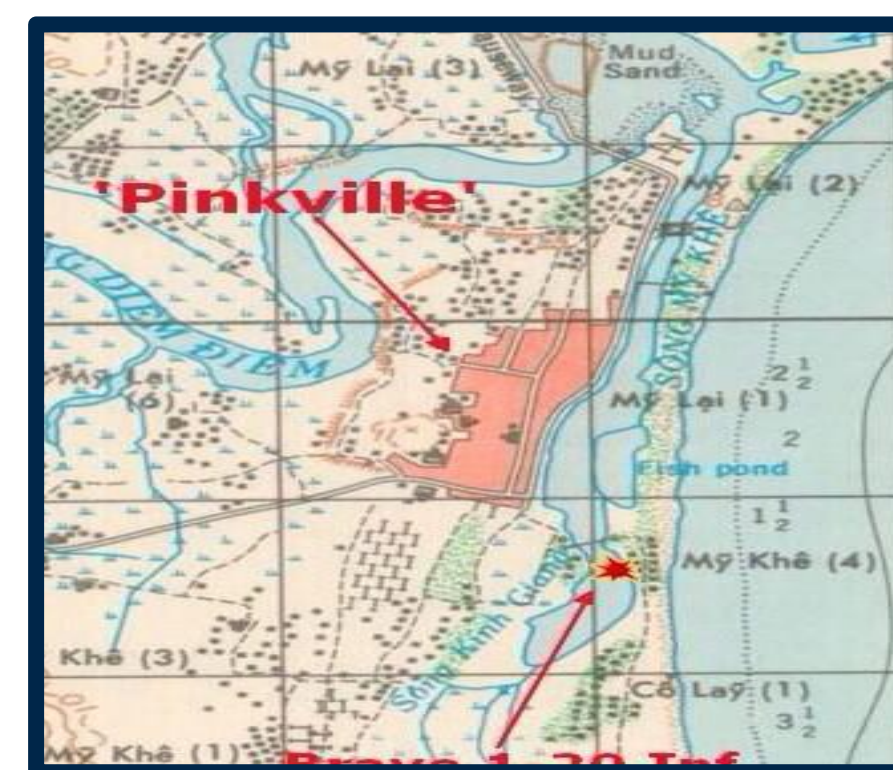
Quang Ngai Province:

O'Brien served in a region within the Quang Ngai Province of Vietnam, known for being one of the most notorious areas for enemy activity. This area included the village of My Lai, the site of the infamous war atrocity by American Soldiers in March of 1968. It was also the province that suffered the destruction of many civilians, high casualties, and many inhabitants were moved into refugee camps.



O'Brien experienced great civilian hostility and mentions the area was littered with landmines, where the land seemed to claim more victims than the Viet Cong did. He said that the soldiers were afraid of the land in much the same way that young children are afraid of dark closets and monsters under the bed.

Throughout the novel, the land assumes a variety of human characteristics—so many, in fact, that the place itself becomes much more than the setting for the story in a conventional sense. Indeed, it becomes a principal element in opposition to the protagonist and his comrades. In short, the place is a principal antagonist.



Speaking of Courage:

- "blink and shrug"
- With anthropomorphism, a place originating in the author's own life has become a character in the story and one that stands in opposition to the war-haunted protagonist.

"Ghost Soldiers":

- "The land was haunted.... Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering"

"Field Trip":

- This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride... I blamed this place for what I had become,"

"How to Tell a True War Story":

- A soldier tells the narrator of a bizarre experience on a mission where soldiers began hearing "chamber music," and believe that these sounds are not products of the human tongue.

- "The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks"

"The Man I Killed"

- "I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy.... The grenade was to make him go away... I wanted to warn him"

Analysis:

- The narrator opposed the war and had no animus or conflict with the Vietnamese people.
- By demonizing the terrain, the narrator avoids making an enemy of the people.
- When American soldiers think of the ground as an enemy, it is not surprising to see them react to it with violence, taking out their innermost inexpressible emotions on the environment around them and reacting against the landscape with a vengefulness more typically reserved for a human enemy.
- After Kiowa is wounded and drowns, each soldier grapples with guilt and grief. In one of his commentaries, the narrator emphasizes how essential that he articulate "the terrible killing power of the shit field".
- In "The Man I Killed", the narrator stares at the grisly result of the explosion, he tells an imagined biography of the dead man. That story bears remarkable semblance to the narrator's own life story.