There’s a Moral Here: Emerging Ethics in *The Things They Carried*

In Tim O’Brien’s novel, *The Things They Carried*, Lieutenant Cross’ unit spends a week in a run-down religious pagoda somewhere in Vietnam. In this chapter, called “Church,” Henry Dobbins confides to Kiowa that he’d like to become a minister, not to study theology or write sermons, but to simply be “nice to people . . . treat them decent, you know?” (115-117). Regardless of his feelings, Dobbins is a soldier—obligated to destroy, and oftentimes to kill. Ministering to the Vietnamese or to his fellow soldiers is certainly not applicable to his role as a “machine gunner” with “15 pounds of ammunition draped . . . across his chest and shoulders” (5). Dobbins and his comrades, then, are faced with a dilemma: how can one maintain some form of “decency” while almost constantly performing acts of destruction?

Vietnam War literature is characterized by this dilemma. Youn-Son Chung claims that “no other war in American history has demanded as much moral choice of the individual soldier as the Vietnam War,” and most critics agree that when it comes to morality, O’Brien’s characters take the wrong approach (148). Alex Vernon claims that “‘Church’ is the book’s comic vignette” and that Dobbins’ confession is wholly ironic, because “in the morning, the unit moves out, their bodies bathed in the church water and fed from the church garden . . . ready to waste gooks once again” (174). For Vernon, the crux is not that the soldiers are required to return to violence, but that they are desensitized to it. His use of the racial slur “gook” implies that the soldiers are indifferent to the people they kill, having lost their morality almost completely in the jungle. According to Bernard Edelman, even before the war had ended, popular culture was creating a “victim out of control” stereotype as the “model combat vet” (27). Film and television began to portray the Vietnam War as a moral vacuum: sucking innocent young Americans into the jungle and spewing out “drugged-crazed baby killer(s) . . . filled with anger, unable to love”
(27). In an episode of *M*A*S*H*, a drama about the Korean War meant as an allegory for Vietnam, two soldiers use boxing gloves coated in ether to win a tournament fight. “It’s not very ethical,” says the one. “It’s not even moral,” replies his friend, “but we’re in a war zone” (*Requiem*). Similar instances in Vietnam-era television, music, and newspaper opinion columns suggest that soldiers translated the lawlessness of combat to their everyday moral decisions.

However, O’Brien includes many small instances of human kindness in his dark war narrative which are contrary to the expected actions of a soldier. Exploring these instances shows that the soldiers in *The Things They Carried* do not abandon their morals. On the contrary, they develop a much broader perspective on morality, which encompasses their duty to the U.S. Army, the horrors of battle, their relations with their fellow soldiers, and their treatment of the Vietnamese. Indeed, this ambiguous new moral code is, in some ways, more “decent” than the rigidly defined moral code they have been raised to respect. They do, as popular culture and critics suggest, develop some negative values in Vietnam, but they also learn to discern between true and fallacious cultural assumptions, a skill that their civilian counterparts have yet to develop. To survive in the lawless world of the jungle, the soldiers must evaluate situations without the moral prejudices, both positive and negative, that exist in America, particularly regarding race. Instead of returning to the U.S. as mere damaged minds, the soldiers contribute wisdom and perspective to the moral fabric of American society during a period of civil unrest and prejudice.

Having been raised to view morality in the traditional American sense of good versus evil, the soldiers are lost in the ethical chaos of Vietnam. In this era, the U.S. moral code was heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian values, and the men in Cross’ unit have been raised in a culture where the “Ten Commandments” are deeply ingrained. Even Vietnam-era children’s
books, like “The First Book of Ethics,” feature illustrations of the Ten Commandments bearing the message “Thou shalt not kill” (Black 15). The prevalence of Bible imagery in The Things They Carried shows how the religious beliefs of this era permeated moral culture. One example is Jimmy Cross, who obsesses over whether Martha is a “virgin.” Though twisted, the idea of virginity having sexual appeal stems from the religious tradition of worthy brides being sexually pure. Many Americans, like the Reverend George R. Davis, believed that the U.S. had a “moral obligation” to be in Vietnam, to stop the spread of Communism before it reached America (Hamilton 46). Ironically, in order to “protect” their way of life, and the morals of a society which condemned violence and honored purity, soldiers were expected to kill and were seldom punished for rape and other forms of immorality. To show his personal moral devotion, Kiowa carries around “an illustrated New Testament” and places the teachings of Christ “beneath his head as a pillow” (3, 17). Yet, in the morning, he must pack the Ten Commandments away and be ready to kill.

Because evil acts are condoned and even encouraged in Vietnam, traditional moral law becomes irrelevant, and the men are offered a lawless freedom. Murder switches abruptly from sin to civic duty, and neither Kiowa’s Bible nor The First Book of Ethics can identify certain actions as being right or wrong. When Rat Kiley tortures a baby water buffalo as a way of expressing his grief over a friend’s death, the men cannot decide whether the act is justified. In Mitchell Sanders’ words, Vietnam is the “Garden of Evil” where “every sin’s fresh and original” (77). The men have been placed in a new situation, much like Adam in the Garden of Eden, where evil is an inevitable choice. They cannot leave Vietnam without partaking of the forbidden fruit—in this case, violence and immorality. Many critics claim that being in an environment devoid of morals causes soldiers to go through, referencing Joseph Conrad, a “Heart of
Darkness” experience, where they discover their own capacity for evil and (like Mr. Kurtz) ultimately succumb to it. Tobey C. Herzog describes this experience as being “stripped of civilization’s restraints, confronting evil, primal emotions, chaos, and savagery . . . the horrors . . . of the soul” (25). In Herzog’s opinion, Vietnam is a breeding ground for lawless and immoral behavior because there is no retribution for sin. Curt Lemon’s “trick-or-treating” experience confirms a lack of discipline in Cross’ unit. Lemon leaves the compound wearing nothing but “boots and balls and an M-16,” holds a gun to a Vietnamese woman’s head, and “strips her right down” (226-227). Yet he’s never punished or even reprimanded. In an interview, O’Brien explains that “in war you don’t get arrested” for murder or torture. “You get applauded, or at least your actions are implicitly sanctioned” (Writing 108). Because they have no moral laws, the men in Cross’ unit are given the opportunity to shape their own moral characters, for good or for evil, without fear of the legal or social consequences they would face back home.

Strangely, the deterioration of moral law in Vietnam does not cause all soldiers to abandon their ethics, but rather it heightens their desire for moral integrity, specifically in their interactions with others. A few, like Curt Lemon, take advantage of a world without consequences. The majority, however, are haunted by their new-found capacity for evil. This withdrawal from morality actually creates a craving for decency, or in the words of narrator-O’Brien, “in the midst of evil you want to be a good man” (77). Instead of enjoying freedom from consequences, the men grieve for the moral system they have lost, for “justice and courtesy and things [they] never knew [they] wanted” (77). Rather than turn to their primal natures, the soldiers work to maintain some form of moral justice in their war-time community. When Dave Jensen breaks Lee Strunk’s nose in a fistfight, he is plagued by the thought that Strunk might come for revenge. Rather than allow Strunk’s primal nature to win-out, Jensen breaks his own
nose as an apology and to show that some form of justice has been satisfied. This method of justice echoes the Jewish concept of “an eye for an eye,” showing again the prominence of religious morals in the men’s upbringing. Because the men still adamantly cling to the basic sentiments of their childhood morals, a “Heart of Darkness” experience cannot really take place. They refuse to give in to the temptation of lawlessness.

However, because flawed American morals have no place in Vietnam, the only way for the soldiers to maintain moral integrity is by the creation of a new law, which condemns by intention rather than by action. It might be justified to kill a baby water buffalo in one situation, while in another situation, it might be abominable. When the soldiers face situations that do not have a defined “right” choice, they must forget their peace-time American values and think from more than one perspective. When Mitchell Sanders cuts the thumb from a Viet Cong corpse and presents it to Norman Bowker, Bowker must choose between two wrongs. Lynn Wharton poses the question, “should Bowker reject a gift from a buddy, or should he honour the gift and carry a dead man’s thumb around with him?” Wharton argues that “there is no ‘right’ answer” because neither choice is ethical. However, Wharton focuses on characters through the lens of the “American self” and traditional American morality. When American morals are removed from the situation, Bowker’s choice is easy. Sanders is a comrade who shares Bowker’s fears and pains, and who either has or likely will someday save Bowker’s life. The Viet Cong corpse is just that—a corpse to which Bowker has no loyalty. Taking the thumb from Sanders is socially acceptable under the new moral code, and is, in fact, the more “decent” choice.

By learning to judge from multiple perspectives, the soldiers ultimately discover that some American morals are not only inapplicable in war, but erroneous in non-combat situations. In one especially poignant scene, a young Vietnamese girl dances outside her ruined home after
the soldiers have destroyed her village and her family. Azar mocks the girl’s dance, doing “an erotic thing with his hips,” and Henry Dobbins, the man who is so determined to treat people decently, threatens to throw Azar down a well (130). The soldiers feel pain and guilt over what they have done to the village and to the girl, and honor her method of mourning as a small recompense. Though the girl is Vietnamese and technically the “enemy,” the men support her over Azar because they see his mockery as immoral and disrespectful. Ironically, it is Azar’s prejudiced behavior that is condoned by American morals, despite its obvious indecency. The men have been raised to believe that the U.S. is morally superior to Communist countries like Vietnam, and therefore morally superior to the Vietnamese people. Racial and national prejudice is a strong value that the men have accepted growing up in the United States. It is not until they come to Vietnam that they see how narrow-minded and wrong that prejudice is. However strange it might seem from the lens of the soldiers’ old moral perspective, Dobbins threatening a fellow soldier in defense of a Vietnamese girl is truly the “decent” thing to do. Dobbins’ simple rebuke to Azar is to “dance right,” because Azar’s prejudice and limited moral perspective can be criticized in the same way his dance moves can: completely inappropriate (130).

The soldiers not only develop compassion for the Vietnamese, but at times, a sense of equality as they cooperate to survive. Only in the jungles of Vietnam, where old moral conventions have disintegrated, can the men consider native Vietnamese as fellow humans, as decent people like themselves. When the unit is trying to navigate a particularly deadly minefield, an “old poppa-san” with a “tightrope walker’s feel for the land” becomes their most valuable ally (32). After nearly a week of trusting their lives to the old man, they come to actually love him, and when the choppers come to take them away from their “enemy,” it is not a relief, but a “sad scene” of tears and embraces (32). Race theorist George Lipsitz says that,
particularly for Vietnam veterans, “lessons about mutuality and interdependence often break
down prejudice and parochialism” (95). Cross’ men survive the minefield because of the old
poppa-san, and though they still use the slur “dink” to describe him, it has evolved into a term of
affection and has lost its condescending connotation. The narrow-minded beliefs about moral or
racial superiority that the men may have possessed when they arrived in Vietnam are erased by
sharing experiences and needs with the Vietnamese people.

Because they do not let prejudice cloud their discernment, the soldiers actually improve
on American moral justice, specifically in regards to racism, upon returning to the United States.
When Norman Bowker comes home, his most painful war memory is of Kiowa sinking into the
“shit-field” (139). Kiowa is identified as a Native American, another racial minority that was
traditionally discriminated against in Vietnam-era U.S.A. During this time, over 260 “Indian
Schools” were currently in operation, where Native American children were taught not only how
to read and write, but how to do housework and “make everything spic and span and sanitary”
as though they were dirty and stupid (Thompson 16). Bowker himself, at the beginning of the
novel, acknowledges this stereotype by calling Kiowa a “smart Indian.” After the war, prejudice
toward Native Americans was still in full force. One Native American veteran said of the
experience that “the first thing that happens when I get back is that some white kid, a girl, at the
L.A. airport spits on me” (Holm 182). Bowker, however, has learned to see past discrimination,
past racial or national entitlement, and focus on basic human relationships. To him, Kiowa is a
friend before he is a Native American, or even a soldier.

Despite all the horrors they experience, the soldiers become better men as a direct result
of their time in Vietnam, and are prepared for life in a progressing America. Norman Bowker
finds that he cannot fit in when he returns to his small town. His old friends and neighbors have
not experienced the war, have not felt the pain, and most importantly, have not learned the lessons about morality that Cross’ men have learned. O’Brien shows the town’s stagnant and bigoted way of thinking by having Bowker circle the lake in the town again and again, seeing the same people, doing more or less the same things, never changing. Bowker cannot even talk about the war to his community because of the limited scope of their moral view. He cannot express the sorrow he feels over Kiowa to neighbors who would likely care much less after hearing Kiowa’s Native American name. In “Church” one of the monks makes a “strange washing motion with his hands,” which Henry Dobbins repeats during his vow of decency, as if to cleanse himself from the sins he has committed (117). Bowker has a similar experience, submerging himself in the lake of his hometown as a symbolic cleansing from not just his own sins, but more importantly the sins of his American neighbors. If the soldiers do indeed pass through a “Heart of Darkness” in Vietnam, they come out of it better men than those who never experience the ambiguities of war. The veterans are better than small-town Americans who are “bored by the daily body counts, who [switch] channels at the mention of politics,” and better than the “old man in Omaha who forgot to vote” (170). The soldiers have maintained their integrity amid the horrors of war, and have identified the faults of their upbringing as well. The people at home pity the soldiers, seeing only mentally and morally compromised men. But the soldiers have, in fact, developed morals much better suited to the forming global community, as well as to the changes ignited by the Civil Rights Movement. In 1969, a team of sociologists predicted that America’s “collective ability to deal with prejudice may well spell the difference between . . . viability . . . and defeat” at every institutional level (Glock 183). Cross’ men are not the moral casualties that Vietnam soldiers are assumed to be. Rather, they are moral survivors,
and are prepared to shape America into a country where prejudice between races, and between entire countries, no longer impedes discernment or moral justice.
Works Cited


