Who Wears the Pants: The Unraveling of Gender in *The Things They Carried*

In Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, gender roles shift during times of war from the traditional, American standard of men as providers and women as homemakers to both genders taking on any characteristics demanded by a situation, regardless of sex. As is common in American culture, men go off to fight while the women show support by sending care packages and letters, but both genders are forced to abandon these stereotypes as the realities of war set in. Mary Anne, who enters Vietnam as a soldier’s girlfriend, but leaves as a soldier herself, “makes you think about those girls back home, how pure and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years” (108). The girls back home will never understand war and its effects because their gender roles and sense of identity are still intact. The soldiers initially try to identify themselves based on these roles, but as culture collapses, so does their sense of identity. Only those who experience the realities of war can truly comprehend the ways in which the chaos can dirty one’s understanding of who he is. The soldiers’ concept of gender is blurred, making them unable to return home unaffected because they no longer have a true understanding of their identity. After the war ends, the soldiers are unable to adapt back into the societal norm because war becomes the place where they associate their concept of gender and identity, and that cannot be replicated during times of peace.

Many critics are discussing war’s detrimental impact on the meaning of gender for the soldiers and everyone affected by the struggle in Vietnam. An understanding of one’s identity begins with a cultural definition of gender. What it means to be a man is directly related to being the opposite of society’s definition of a woman, and vice versa. It is for this reason that the soldiers, as Benjamin Mangrum points out, “find pleasure in feminizing the enemy” and use degrading feminine descriptions to depict anything contrary to the ideal of an American, male
soldier (33). Although this correctly notes how men try to sustain their masculinity and define themselves as men against feminine characteristics, Mangrum fails to recognize what happens to a soldier’s understanding of gender and identity when he no longer has a female standard to compare himself to. If women fight in the war just the same, then what significance is there in being a man? Losing a female counterpart forces the soldiers to recreate their definition of gender.

While the critical conversation focuses mostly on the concept of gender as the main identifier for a soldier, experts in sociology have looked at all the components and experiences that make up one’s identity as a whole. Modern research, like that conducted by social scientists Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama, indicates that the “self is composed of multiple identities, and these notions of identity are culture bound” (163). Therefore, a shift in any one aspect of identity, like gender, which comes as a result of the changing culture of war, leads to a disintegration of all understandings of one’s purpose and existence. Because conservative gender roles are so widely accepted in America, what it means to be a man—one’s definition of gender—is a product of culture and directly correlates to being an American. Consequently, when a soldier loses his understanding of his gender, he loses his identity and sense as an American. I argue that The Things They Carried suggests that gender is a result of societal upbringing. The soldiers’ concept of gender changes with the constant chaos of war, thus altering their understanding of what it means to belong to a specific sex. Because gender correlates with other cultural aspects of identity, the deterioration of their understanding of gender in turn hinders the soldiers’ ability to identify with their nationality. The meaning of war is lost as it becomes a place where one’s entire concept of identity is shattered along with the ability to find purpose in fighting or function in society after the fact.
American society during peace impresses clear and understood gender roles as part of what creates the American identity. Gender plays a huge part in determining how individuals participate in war and defend their title as Americans. During the time of the Vietnam War, men defined themselves as producers and providers, while women, on the other hand, identified as homemakers. Women in America traditionally stayed home while the men put on their stars and stripes and headed off to war when duty called. In her correspondence to Lieutenant Cross, Martha “never mentioned the war” (23). This isn’t because she doesn’t care about his well-being and what he is doing as a soldier; she never asks about the war because that isn’t her place. As a woman, she is expected to stay at home and hold down the front, not get tied down in the intricacies and details of battle. Looking at perceptions of gender at this time, Bren Ortega Murphy discovered that women “seemed to regard their wardrobes and marrying into money as their primary foci” (64). It is out of place, and consequently, un-American for a woman to take on the role of a man by being too involved with war. Her place is, instead, taking care of the family and household. The American sense of identity is largely based on following the set standard and expected behaviors that coincide with each gender. Therefore, those who do not follow the status quo of their role as women unravel American society and the accepted standard of gender and identity. The woman, as Lorrie Smith indicates, “who understands war too well . . . threaten[s] male hegemony and phallic power” (23). Men cannot feel like men if women do not act like women. Although the dichotomy between male and female gender roles is accurately described in Smith’s critique, she fails to explain the nature of those expectations. Because the concepts of gender and identity are created and understood within the American specific society, an understanding of gender, as well as national identity, shifts when that society changes during times of war.
War causes the American society to shift, and as a result, expected gender roles and the understanding of expected behavior also change. Suddenly, men and women find themselves in a completely different culture than what they are used to. Only women and children remain at home while the men are off on foreign soil without their wives or girlfriends. The general absence of the opposite sex causes men and women to abandon their expected gender roles and take upon themselves the personas that need to be filled. While appearing tough on the outside as they pack heavy artillery and other essentials, special care is taken by the male soldiers to hump sentimental items, like Henry Dobbins carrying “his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter” (O’Brien 9). The fact that the men carry around these items of romance and nostalgia shows they all have an underlying sense of femininity that is coming out because of the war. The women who go to war don’t fulfill their typical gender roles, but rather, take on characteristics generally associated with men because the intense circumstances of war demand those qualities in its soldiers. Mary Anne takes on traits assumed to belong to men because she is in a heightened environment of war where courage and apathy matter more than personal hygiene. It is evident how quickly gender roles disappear by how “she quickly fell into the habits of the bush” (94). Mary Anne’s concept of gender and how she should behave come from the society she grew up in. America told her to dress cute, wash her hair, and marry young. But she isn’t in America anymore—she’s in war. The war doesn’t care what gender she is, and spending her time on “cosmetics” and “fingernail filing” won’t help America win (94). Instead, Mary Anne simply does what she needs to in order to survive in this new environment, and that means taking on the role of a man. The new culture created by war forces the soldiers to abandon understood gender roles for ones that better suit their purpose in fighting. However, this doesn’t only affect how the soldiers behave, it changes the meaning of gender to them completely.
Because the distinct division between gender roles has disappeared, belonging to a specific sex no longer has any significant meaning. Mark Fossie is the first to criticize the breaking of these barriers because Mary Anne, his girlfriend, is becoming more of a man than he was. He brought her to Vietnam in the first place to show her off as a trophy, claiming that in order to bring a girl to Vietnam, all you needed was a “pair of solid brass balls” (89). Mary Anne’s presence alone proves that Fossie is the only soldier man enough to get a girl there. However, when that notion and his conception of his gender are threatened by Mary Anne’s descent into savage masculinity, he can’t handle it. He must lay down the law by declaring one thing for sure, “there won’t be any more ambushes” (99). From that moment on, Fossie forces Mary Anne to have her hair washed, wear skirts, and ask his approval before speaking. All this happens as an attempt by Fossie to reassert his dominance over his girlfriend and prove to himself and the other soldiers that he is a man, trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to keep his understanding of gender from slipping away. The soldiers’ preconceived notions of how gender defines them vanishes in the chaos of war due to diminishing gender roles and blurred lines between the distinction of male and female. This takes a huge toll on the soldiers because they can no longer identify themselves by belonging to a specific sex. They come to realize, as Susan Farrell points out, “gender . . . really operate[s] according to agreed-upon rules,” and not as an innate characteristic or function of their identity (11). This is the new understanding that the soldiers have regarding gender: being a man now functions as a means of cultural upbringing and circumstance, and therefore has no significance outside of that culture. These soldiers claim to be men because that is how they functioned back home. But this is Vietnam, and they serve a different purpose here—one where being a man does not mean the same thing. Here, during war,
even women can behave like men. This new definition of gender causes a deep identity crisis in the soldiers.

Changing the meaning of gender causes the soldiers to lose their understanding of the entire concept of identity. Both genders appear lost and confused because they don’t know what to make of themselves and their actions now that they no longer have a standard to compare themselves to. The men can’t tell if they are being manly because women are roughing it on the battlefield the same as they are. Mary Anne tries, but even she cannot make sense of her identity. No matter how much she digs, “she [is] lost inside herself” (110). She has no true concept of who she is as a woman because she is acting contrary to how she has been taught her whole life.

Because gender is such a huge part of how these soldiers define themselves while in Vietnam, the loss of that definition puts a hole in their understanding of their identity. While recounting old war stories, Rat Kiley explains that the “only difference between Mary Anne and the men” was the fact that she’s a “girl,” which “didn’t amount to jack” because based on how they behaved, there was no profound distinction between her and the male soldiers (93). The one difference between Mary Anne and the men, their sex, is insignificant because they come to find that there are no inherent differences between American men and women when they are in Vietnam. All disparity between genders is a product of circumstance and cultural upbringing. With no contrast between the way men and women behave during war, belonging to a specific gender no longer has any significance or meaning. As a result of that, it can no longer be used as a means of identification. Gender is connected to the other means by which the soldiers identify themselves, and losing their definition of what it means to be a man hinders their ability to have any concept of identity whatsoever.
Due to the fact that the soldiers’ understanding of what it means to be American directly correlates to their understanding of gender, changing what it means to be men alters their idea of what it means to be citizens of the United States. Citizens, as Margaret Wood found, “were encouraged to develop a sense of complete identification with the nation which surpassed all other forms of identity” (277). These men and women initially act the way they do because that is how America told them they should act. The men went to Vietnam to “kill and maybe die” to fulfill a patriarchal obligation while the women “belonged to another world” as their presence overseas existed mostly in the form of correspondence to the soldiers (O’Brien 57,16). All of the duties they performed as men and women also fulfilled their place as Americans. However, with the deterioration of their understanding of gender comes the depreciation of their American identity. Because these men and women in Vietnam are no longer fulfilling the same roles, their actions contradict their understanding of patriotism. The foreign soil brings into question the authenticity of their national identity and belief of what it means to be true Americans. With the dichotomy between set gender roles and American principles, the soldiers find no significant meaning in being American and are at a loss for a sense of who they are.

Because the soldiers can no longer be identified by their gender, nor can they identify themselves as Americans, they lose their understanding of war and what it means to be fighting in it. Originally these boys accept the call into the draft because they are “embarrassed not to” as they try to fulfill gender roles and expectations society places on them (57). They came to fight as men and as Americans to protect their country and their girlfriends, but no longer feel that purpose because their women are “there,” fighting in the action right along with them (108). Mary Anne is just as tough as any man in Vietnam, if not more. With that knowledge and realization, these soldiers stop seeing war as a way to be heroes and men, so they lose the desire
and purpose to fight in it. To them, war ceases to be the place to earn a medal of honor; instead, it becomes a place where identity disappears. The longer they are in Vietnam, the further their understanding of identity unravels. The soldiers lose their purpose and devotion to the war because they realize they would rather be safe back home where they understand and fit accepted standards rather than battling this ambiguity.

After having their complete sense of identity destroyed and losing their purpose in fighting the war, these soldiers cannot exist and function in a society where traditional roles and definitions are so firmly established. Commenting on the mentality of a soldier returning home from war, O’Brien writes, “The war’s over. You close your eyes. . . . and think, Christ, what’s the point?” (79). Because the Vietnam War backfired in the minds of Americans, causing the soldiers to lose their support from the public, their masculinity is shattered even at home to the point where they cannot identify as American men or function in society. They went to war to fulfill their duty as men, but after hearing nothing but disapproval for their actions, suddenly being a man is contrary to being an American. The soldiers no longer feel any sense of belonging or understanding anywhere other than combat. The soldiers are unable to find refuge at home because their new understanding of gender and identity does not fit cohesively with any culture or environment they find themselves in outside of Vietnam. Therefore, the effects war has on its soldiers, as pointed out in The Things They Carried, causes us to see that war becomes a place where men lose themselves amongst blurred concepts of identity and creates the inability for them to function within a community either at home or abroad.
Works Cited


