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Lesson Three

FOCUS:

Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of a work of fiction, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Things They Carried defies many of the categorizations to which readers of literary fiction have become accustomed. Critics debate whether the book is a novel or a collection of short stories. The title page offers no help resolving the dispute, simply declaring the book “a work of fiction.” Similarly, readers often wonder whether the book is mostly memoir, or strictly fiction. Mostly narrated by a first-person narrator whose name is the same as the author’s, the similarities between events that take place in O’Brien’s writing and his life are evident. Yet, however cleverly *The Things They Carried* incorporates elements of memoir, it remains a work of fiction because the author invented and embellished the stories within its pages. O’Brien has explained in many interviews that he sees little correlation between “truth” in literature and what actually happened. Instead, O’Brien creates stories that lead readers who have not experienced the horrors of war to an understanding of its emotional and physical toll.

Discussion Activities

The first story, “The Things They Carried,” is written in the third-person point of view. Ask your students how this serves to introduce the rest of the book. Were they surprised when O’Brien switched to first-person point of view and they realized the narrator was one of the soldiers?

Ask several students to share their one-paragraph synopses of the stories they read as a homework assignment. Discuss the ways each of the stories deals with O’Brien’s memories of times before, during, or after the war.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay discussing the differences between memoir and fiction. They might explore one or more of the following questions: Is it acceptable to invent scenes or dialogue when writing a memoir? Why or why not? Is it all right to add elements of real-life events in fiction writing? If so, must the author let the reader know what is factual, and what is not?

Homework

Read “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist.” Ask your students to identify the protagonist of each story.