

Name _____

Period _____

The Things They Carried
“How to Tell a True War Story”

Literature Focus: Paradox

L.9-10.4a, L.9-10.5a; L.11-12.4a, L.11-12.5a

In “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien employs paradoxes throughout his narrative to develop complex thoughts on the subjects of war and memory. A **paradox** is a statement that contains a *literal* contradiction, but makes sense *figuratively* as you consider its meaning. A paradox of war is that you have to kill people to keep people from killing each other. Here are some basic examples from the novel.

“I’m here but I’m not here.”

“It was the best and worst day of my life.”

“She has her act together but she’s falling all apart.”

What is the contradiction in each of these statements?

What is the deeper meaning conveyed beyond the contradiction?

Part I: Paradoxes in Text

Directions: Now that you have considered some general examples of paradoxes, it’s time to expand upon your initial reading of “How to Tell a True War Story.” Examine the following list of paradoxes from this chapter. Choose three to analyze and explain.

What is the contradiction within each?

What is the figurative meaning behind each?

- A. “A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (80).
- B. “If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth” (66).
- C. “In many cases, a true war story cannot be believed” (68).
- D. “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (78).
- E. “It can be argued, for instance that war is grotesque, but in truth, war is also beauty” (77).
- F. “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (81).
- G. “Though it’s odd, you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead” (78).
- H. “To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace” (77).
- I. “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end” (40).
- J. “You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not” (77).

1. Letter of chosen paradox: _____

Contradiction: _____

Figurative meaning: _____

Name _____

Period _____

The Things They Carried

2. Letter of chosen paradox: _____

Contradiction: _____

Figurative meaning: _____

3. Letter of chosen paradox: _____

Contradiction: _____

Figurative meaning: _____

Part II: Finding the Paradoxes in Your World

O'Brien's text has introduced you to the concept of paradox in literature, but you have certainly experienced paradoxes in your life. You will now be responsible for sharing a paradox with the class and representing its complexity.

- Find an example of a paradox from your world. Consider sources like song lyrics, films, advertisements and photographs.
- Share your examples of paradoxes, either in class or for homework if your class has a social networking platform. Consider expressing your paradox through memes, collages, or word clouds.
- Explain why you believe this paradox is meaningful.
- Share your thoughts with classmates about how you can understand and relate to the paradoxes they share.

Part III: Reflecting on the Use of Paradoxes

Now that you have had the opportunity to analyze and create your own representations of paradoxes, answer the following questions:

4. Why do writers and artists use paradoxes to convey their ideas? _____

5. If you were writing or creating something, why would using a paradox be an effective strategy? _____

