

Article

The embodied mind in the trenches: A neurophenomenological exploration of sensory experience, trauma, and the battlefield in Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried"

Hamed Jamalpour^{1,*}, Zahra Jamalpour², Manzar Feiz³

¹ English Language and Literature Department, Karaj Islamic Azad University, Karaj 3149968111, Iran

² Medicine Department, Alborz University of Medical Science, Karaj 3198764653, Iran

³ Comparative Literature Department, The University of Texas at Dallas, TX 75080, USA

* Corresponding author: Hamed Jamalpour, hamed.jamalpour@umontreal.ca

CITATION

Jamalpour H, Jamalpour Z, Feiz M. The embodied mind in the trenches: A neurophenomenological exploration of sensory experience, trauma, and the battlefield in Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried". *Literature Forum*. 2025; 2(1): 2496.
<https://doi.org/10.59400/lf2496>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 31 December 2024

Accepted: 5 February 2025

Available online: 19 February 2025

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2025 author(s).

Literature Forum is published by China Scientific Research Publishing. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" transcends a mere war narrative. It delves into the profound assault on the human psyche and body experienced by soldiers grappling with combat horrors. This paper argues that a neurophenomenological framework offers a crucial lens for understanding these experiences, particularly their embodied responses to sensory overload and the enduring impact of trauma. Neurophenomenology posits that consciousness and the body are intertwined. Perceptions, emotions, and cognitions are rooted in bodily sensations. In Vietnam, soldiers endured a constant barrage of sensory stimuli: deafening artillery, the stench of death, and stifling humidity. These sensory experiences profoundly shaped their perceptions, emotions, and sense of self. "The Things They Carried" vividly illustrates this embodied reality. O'Brien details the soldiers' physical and psychological burdens: the weight of equipment, the constant fear, and the guilt of witnessing comrades perish. These manifest as physical weight, but also as profound dread, racing heartbeat, trembling hands, and the ever-present threat of nausea. The treacherous terrain—the muddy swamps, the dense jungle—contributes to a profound sense of disorientation and alienation. By examining the soldiers' experiences through a neurophenomenological framework, this paper aims to demonstrate how the sensory, bodily, and emotional dimensions of war are central to understanding the psychological and emotional impact of combat. "The Things They Carried" serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of embodied experience, highlighting the profound and lasting impact of war on the human psyche and body.

Keywords: The Things They Carried; Tim O'Brien; neurophenomenology; embodied cognition; sensory perception; trauma; PTSD

1. Introduction

Neurophenomenology, a burgeoning field that bridges neuroscience and phenomenology, challenges the traditional Cartesian dualism that separates mind and body. It posits that consciousness and the body are not distinct entities but are deeply interconnected. Our perceptions, emotions, and even our sense of self are not abstract mental processes but are deeply rooted in bodily sensations and embodied experiences. Every sight, every sound, every touch, and every internal sensation—from the pounding of our heart to the tension in our muscles—contributes to our conscious experience. In the context of the Vietnam War, soldiers were subjected to a constant barrage of sensory stimuli: the deafening roar of artillery, the acrid stench of death and decay, the stifling humidity, and the omnipresent threat of injury or death. These sensory experiences were not mere background noise; they were actively shaping the

soldiers' perceptions, emotions, and ultimately, their very sense of reality. The constant fear of death, the ever-present threat of injury, and the witnessing of horrific violence created a state of hypervigilance, where every sound, every movement, and every shadow became a potential threat.

In the book O'Brien [1] vividly illustrates trauma, particularly through the character of Norman Bowker in the chapter "Speaking of Courage": He wished he could've explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. The distinction was important. He wished he could've explained to his father that it wasn't the fear that had stopped him, but the stink. The stink, that's what it was. He remembered how he'd pulled away, how he'd turned and run, how the smell had made him gag. He remembered the way Kiowa had disappeared under the waste and water. He remembered the bubbles. He remembered reaching out and touching the boot, then pulling back. He remembered the smell. He wished he could've explained to his father that it wasn't the fear, but the smell. He wished he could've said it wasn't the fear of dying, but the stink of the shit field. He wished he could've said something. But all he could do was drive.

This passage captures the trauma of Norman Bowker, who is haunted by the memory of Kiowa's death in the "shit field" during the war. The repetition of sensory details—particularly the smell—highlights how trauma is often tied to visceral, inescapable memories. Norman's inability to articulate his experience, his cyclical thoughts, and his isolation as he drives aimlessly around the lake all reflect the paralyzing nature of PTSD. The passage also underscores the guilt and shame that accompany trauma, as Norman fixates on his perceived failure to save Kiowa and his inability to communicate his pain to others. This moment is a powerful depiction of how trauma lingers, intruding on the present and leaving the survivor emotionally stranded.

Neurophenomenology offers a valuable lens for understanding the complex and multifaceted impact of war on the human experience. This interdisciplinary approach aligns with the growing recognition within cognitive science of the crucial role of embodied experience and neural processes in shaping human cognition and behavior. As Jamalpour et al. [2,3] argue, "Many psychology researchers have tried to emphasize the influential role of brain processes in people's decisions and performance by using terms such as organizational cognitive neuroscience. While the previous teachings have emphasized the importance of the concept of schemas or mental templates as the infrastructure of new learning, cognitive neuroscience is looking for how knowledge, insight, and experience are processed in the brain and how the neural connections in the brain cause learning and provide new behavior." This perspective underscores the importance of understanding how war experiences are not only psychologically and emotionally impactful but also neurologically transformative, shaping the very structure and function of the brain.

Key Concepts and Relevance to War Literature:

Embodied Cognition: This core principle, as highlighted by Gallagher [4], emphasizes that "cognition is not a disembodied process but is situated and enmeshed within the lived body." In the context of war, soldiers' experiences are profoundly shaped by their embodied encounters: the weight of equipment, the physical exertion, the constant threat of injury or death, and the visceral impact of violence. These

embodied experiences leave indelible marks on their perception, emotion, and ultimately, their sense of self.

Sensory Integration and Disruption:

Neurophenomenology underscores the crucial role of sensory perception in shaping consciousness. War, with its constant barrage of intense and often traumatic sensory stimuli (explosions, screams, the stench of death), can overwhelm the soldiers' sensory systems. This sensory overload can lead to states of hyperarousal, dissociation, and a profound sense of detachment from reality. As noted by LeDoux [5], "Trauma disrupts the brain's ability to process and integrate sensory information, leading to fragmented memories and a distorted sense of self."

The Embodied Self:

Neurophenomenology emphasizes that the sense of self is not a fixed entity but is constantly shaped by bodily sensations and interactions with the environment. War profoundly disrupts this embodied sense of self. The constant threat of injury and death, the witnessing of horrific violence, and the loss of loved ones can shatter the illusion of bodily safety and integrity. As noted by Damasio [6], "The body is not merely a vessel for the mind, but an active participant in all aspects of human experience, including emotional regulation and social interaction." The trauma of war can disrupt this embodied sense of self, leading to chronic feelings of anxiety, fear, and a profound sense of alienation.

Trauma and the Brain: Neurophenomenology explores how traumatic experiences can alter brain function and neural pathways. The constant exposure to stress hormones during combat can have long-lasting effects on the brain, leading to changes in emotional regulation, memory processing, and social interaction.

How Neurophenomenology Informs the Study of War Literature:

By applying a neurophenomenological framework to war literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of:

- **The Lived Experience of War:** War literature, at its core, seeks to capture the subjective experiences of soldiers. Neurophenomenology provides a framework for analyzing these subjective accounts by considering the interplay of sensory perception, bodily sensations, and emotional states.
- **The Psychological Impact of Trauma:** By examining how war disrupts sensory processing, alters the embodied sense of self, and impacts brain function, we can gain a better understanding of the long-term psychological consequences of combat, such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression.
- **The Role of Embodiment in Coping and Recovery:** Neurophenomenological approaches can shed light on how soldiers cope with the trauma of war through embodied practices such as physical activity, mindfulness, and social connection.

In conclusion, neurophenomenology offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex and multifaceted impact of war on the human experience. By integrating insights from neuroscience and phenomenology, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the lived experiences of soldiers and the profound challenges they face in navigating the aftermath of combat.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* transcends the conventional narrative of war, moving beyond the mere recounting of battles and strategic maneuvers. Instead,

it delves into the profound assault on the human psyche and body experienced by soldiers grappling with the horrors of combat in Vietnam. O'Brien masterfully captures the war not as a series of events, but as a relentless assault on the senses, leaving an indelible mark on the soldiers' perceptions, emotions, and ultimately, their very sense of self. This paper argues that a neurophenomenological framework provides a crucial lens for understanding these profound and enduring impacts, illuminating how the sensory, bodily, and emotional dimensions of war are inextricably intertwined.

The Things They Carried vividly illustrates this embodied reality. O'Brien meticulously details the soldiers' physical and psychological burdens: the weight of rifles and rations, the constant fear of death, and the guilt of witnessing comrades perish. These burdens manifest not only as physical weight but also as a profound sense of dread, a racing heartbeat, trembling hands, and the ever-present threat of nausea. The novel powerfully demonstrates how these physical sensations become inextricably linked to the traumatic events, creating a lasting imprint on the soldiers' bodies and minds. The soldiers carry not only the physical weight of their equipment but also the psychological weight of trauma, guilt, and fear, a weight that manifests in their bodies as a constant state of hyperarousal and a profound sense of unease.

The battlefield itself becomes a potent symbol of this embodied trauma. The treacherous terrain—the muddy swamps, the dense jungle, the ever-shifting landscape—contributes to a profound sense of disorientation and alienation. The soldiers' bodies become both weapons and vulnerabilities, constantly exposed to the dangers of the environment. This embodied vulnerability exacerbates feelings of fear, anxiety, and a profound sense of existential threat. The soldiers are constantly navigating a landscape that is both hostile and unpredictable, a landscape that threatens their physical and psychological well-being at every turn.

By examining the soldiers' experiences through a neurophenomenological framework, this paper aims to demonstrate how the sensory, bodily, and emotional dimensions of war are central to understanding the psychological and emotional impact of combat. *The Things They Carried* serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of embodied experience, offering a poignant reminder of the profound and lasting impact of war on the human psyche and body.

2. Literature review

Embodied Cognition, Sensory Perception, and Trauma in Literature Embodied Cognition:

- Gallagher [4], in his updated work *The Embodied Mind*, emphasizes that "cognition is not a disembodied process but is situated and enmeshed within the lived body." He further argues that "our understanding of the world is shaped by our bodily interactions with it, and that these interactions are deeply intertwined with our emotions and our sense of self." This perspective provides a crucial framework for understanding how the soldiers' experiences in *The Things They Carried*—the weight of their gear, the physical exertion of combat, the constant threat of injury—shape their perceptions, emotions, and ultimately, their sense of reality.

Sensory Perception and Trauma:

- LeDoux [5], in his work *Anxious*, highlights the profound impact of traumatic experiences on the brain's sensory processing systems. He argues that "trauma disrupts the brain's ability to process and integrate sensory information, leading to fragmented memories, heightened sensory sensitivities, and a distorted sense of self." This disruption can manifest in various ways, such as hypervigilance, flashbacks, and an exaggerated startle response, all of which are evident in the experiences of the soldiers in *The Things They Carried*.

Trauma in Literature:

- Simpson [7], in her work on *The Aesthetics of Trauma*, argues that trauma disrupts traditional narrative structures and challenges conventional modes of representation. She contends that "traumatic experiences often defy linear narrative and instead manifest in fragmented, repetitive, or even non-verbal forms." This resonates with O'Brien's use of nonlinear storytelling, fragmented narratives, and the inclusion of subjective and unreliable accounts in *The Things They Carried*, reflecting the fragmented nature of traumatic memories.

This research draws upon these foundational concepts to analyze how O'Brien's portrayal of the Vietnam War experience reflects the embodied nature of trauma, the disruption of sensory processing, and the profound impact of war on the soldiers' sense of self. By examining the interplay of these factors, this analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional impact of war on the human condition as reflected in contemporary literary and scholarly discourse.

3. Materials and methods

- This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically close reading and thematic analysis, to analyze Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* through the lens of Neurophenomenology. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the text, focusing on the nuanced interplay of language, imagery, and narrative techniques to convey the embodied experiences of soldiers grappling with the trauma of war.

Data Collection:

The primary data source for this study is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The novel was carefully read and reread, paying close attention to:

- **Sensory Descriptions:** Detailed analysis of O'Brien's use of sensory language to depict the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch associated with the Vietnam War experience. This includes identifying and analyzing descriptions of explosions, the stench of death and decay, the feel of mud and sweat, and the visceral impact of violence, aligning with LeDoux's [5] emphasis on the crucial role of sensory processing in trauma: "Trauma disrupts the brain's ability to process and integrate sensory information, leading to fragmented memories and a distorted sense of self."
- **Embodied Experiences:** Close attention was paid to the portrayal of embodied sensations within the text, such as the weight of equipment, the physical exertion of combat, the constant threat of injury or death, and the physiological manifestations of fear and anxiety (e.g., racing heartbeat, trembling hands,

nausea), consistent with Gallagher's [4] assertion that cognition is "situated and enmeshed within the lived body."

- Narrative Techniques: Analysis of O'Brien's use of literary devices such as metaphor, simile, imagery, and stream-of-consciousness to convey the subjective and often fragmented nature of the soldiers' experiences, reflecting Simpson's [7] observation that traumatic experiences often "manifest in fragmented, repetitive, or even non-verbal forms."

Data Analysis:

- Thematic analysis was conducted to identify and analyze key themes related to embodied cognition, sensory perception, and trauma in the novel. This process involved:
 - Familiarization: Repeatedly reading the text to gain an in-depth understanding of its content and themes.
 - Code Generation: Identifying and coding relevant passages related to sensory experiences, embodied trauma, the distortion of reality, and the impact of the battlefield environment on the soldiers' sense of self.
 - Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes, such as "Sensory Overload", "Embodied Fear", "The Distortion of Reality", and "The Impact of Trauma on the Embodied Self."
 - Theme Review: Reviewing and refining the identified themes, ensuring their relevance and coherence within the broader context of the novel.
 - Interpretation and Analysis: Analyzing the identified themes through the lens of neurophenomenology, drawing connections between the literary representations and the underlying neurobiological and psychological processes.

This iterative process of data collection and analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of how O'Brien's literary techniques convey the embodied experiences of war and the profound impact of trauma on the human psyche.

4. Limitations

This analysis, while offering valuable insights into the embodied experience of war as depicted in *The Things They Carried*, acknowledges several limitations:

- Focus on a Single Text: The analysis primarily focuses on a single literary work, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader experiences of wartime trauma. While O'Brien's novel offers a powerful and insightful portrayal of the Vietnam War, it represents a specific perspective and may not fully capture the diverse range of experiences and responses to combat.
- Subjectivity of Interpretation: Literary analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation. Different readers may interpret O'Brien's text in varying ways, leading to diverse understandings of the embodied experiences depicted within the novel.
- Limited Empirical Data: This analysis primarily relies on textual analysis and draws upon theoretical frameworks from neurophenomenology. While these frameworks provide valuable insights, further empirical research, such as interviews with veterans or studies utilizing neuroimaging techniques, would be necessary to validate and expand upon the findings presented here.

These limitations highlight the need for further research that incorporates a broader range of perspectives, utilizes diverse methodologies, and examines the lived experiences of veterans more directly.

5. Results and discussion

This analysis of *The Things They Carried* through a neurophenomenological lens reveals profound insights into the embodied experience of war and its enduring impact on the human psyche. O'Brien's masterful portrayal of sensory overload, embodied trauma, and the distortion of reality offers a powerful testament to the devastating consequences of war on the human mind and body.

Implications for Understanding the Human Experience of War:

The findings of this study suggest that a neurophenomenological approach can enrich our understanding of the human experience of war in several ways:

- **Beyond the Battlefield:** This analysis moves beyond the conventional focus on military strategy and tactical maneuvers to explore the lived experiences of soldiers, emphasizing the profound impact of war on their sensory perceptions, bodily sensations, and emotional states.
- **The Embodied Nature of Trauma:** By highlighting the embodied nature of trauma, this study emphasizes that war leaves indelible marks not only on the mind but also on the body. The constant threat of injury, the physical exertion of combat, and the witnessing of horrific violence all contribute to a profound sense of bodily vulnerability and a disruption of the embodied sense of self. This aligns with the work of Sheets-Johnstone [8], who argues that "embodiment is not just about having a body, but about living in and through it, sensing and moving in the world."
- **The Distortion of Reality:** The analysis underscores how the constant exposure to extreme stress and violence can lead to a distortion of reality, manifesting in hallucinations, flashbacks, and a profound sense of detachment from pre-war life. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the subjective and often fragmented nature of traumatic experience, as explored by Simpson [7] in her work on *The Aesthetics of Trauma*.

Ethical Implications:

While *The Things They Carried* offers valuable insights into the human experience of war, it is crucial to acknowledge the ethical implications of using fictional accounts to study real-world trauma. As suggested by Caruth [9], "fictional representations of trauma can both illuminate and misrepresent the lived experiences of those who have suffered." It is important to approach such analyses with sensitivity and respect, recognizing the limitations of fictional narratives in capturing the full complexity of human suffering.

Furthermore, the use of literary texts to explore trauma raises ethical considerations regarding the potential for misinterpretation and the exploitation of human suffering for artistic or academic purposes. As suggested by Butler [10], "the representation of trauma must be approached with a profound sense of responsibility and a commitment to ethical representation."

6. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates the profound and enduring impact of war on the human psyche and body, as illuminated through the lens of neurophenomenology. By examining Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the researcher observes how the soldiers' experiences transcend the realm of abstract ideas and become deeply embedded within their embodied realities. The constant barrage of sensory stimuli, from the deafening roar of explosions to the acrid stench of death, not only alerted the soldiers to imminent danger but also shaped their perceptions, emotions, and ultimately, their sense of self.

These sensory experiences were not merely passive stimuli; they were inextricably intertwined with the soldiers' bodily sensations and physical manifestations of trauma. The constant fear, anxiety, and guilt manifested as rapid heartbeats, trembling hands, and a pervasive sense of dread. The battlefield itself, with its treacherous terrain and constant threat of injury, became a potent symbol of embodied trauma, exacerbating feelings of vulnerability and disorientation.

The Things They Carried poignantly depicts the long-term consequences of these embodied experiences. The memories of combat continue to haunt the soldiers, intruding into their daily lives in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts. The physical manifestations of trauma, such as chronic pain, insomnia, and hypervigilance, continue to plague them long after the war has ended.

This analysis underscores the limitations of viewing war solely through the lens of strategic victories and political outcomes. It highlights the human cost of war, emphasizing the profound and enduring impact on the soldiers' psyches and bodies. By understanding the embodied experiences of war, a deeper appreciation can be gained for the complexities of trauma and the challenges faced by those who have served in combat.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that utilizes neurophenomenology to understand human experience. By applying the principles of neurophenomenology to the analysis of literary texts, new insights can be gained into the intricate interplay between mind, body, and the world.

This analysis, while offering valuable insights, also acknowledges its limitations. It is crucial to recognize that *The Things They Carried*, while a powerful and insightful work, is a fictionalized account. Further research is needed to explore the lived experiences of veterans and to deepen our understanding of the long-term consequences of war on the human psyche and body.

Key takeaways:

- War is not merely a series of battles; it is a profound assault on the human psyche and body.
- Sensory experiences play a critical role in shaping the soldiers' perceptions, emotions, and their sense of self.
- Embodied trauma has long-lasting consequences, impacting the soldiers' physical and mental health long after the war has ended.
- Neurophenomenology offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between mind, body, and the world in the context of war.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, HJ and MF; methodology, HJ; software, MF; validation, HJ, ZJ and MF; formal analysis, HJ; investigation, HJ, and ZJ; resources, HJ; data curation, MF and ZJ; writing—original draft preparation, HJ; writing—review and editing, MF; visualization, MF; supervision, HJ; project administration, HJ; funding acquisition, ZJ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. O'Brien T. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 1990.
2. Jamalpour H, Javad YD. Aesthetic Experience, Neurology and Cultural Memory. *Passagens: Revista Internacional de História Política e Cultura Jurídica*; 2023.
3. Jamalpour Z, Khodarahmi PA, Jamalpour H, et al. Application of neuroscience and cognitive studies in psychology (Portuguese). *Cadernos de Educação Tecnologia e Sociedade*; 2024.
4. Gallagher S. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press; 2023
5. LeDoux J. *Anxious: Using the Brain to Understand and Overcome Fear*. Viking; 2021.
6. Damasio A. *Feeling and Knowing: Making Minds Conscious*. W.W.Norton & Company; 2021.
7. Simpson K. *The Aesthetics of Trauma*. Columbia University Press, 2022.
8. Sheets-Johnstone M. Embodied minds or mindful bodies? A question of fundamental, inherently inter-related aspects of animation. Oregon, 2011.
9. Caruth C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press; 1996.
10. Butler J. *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. London University Press; 2020.