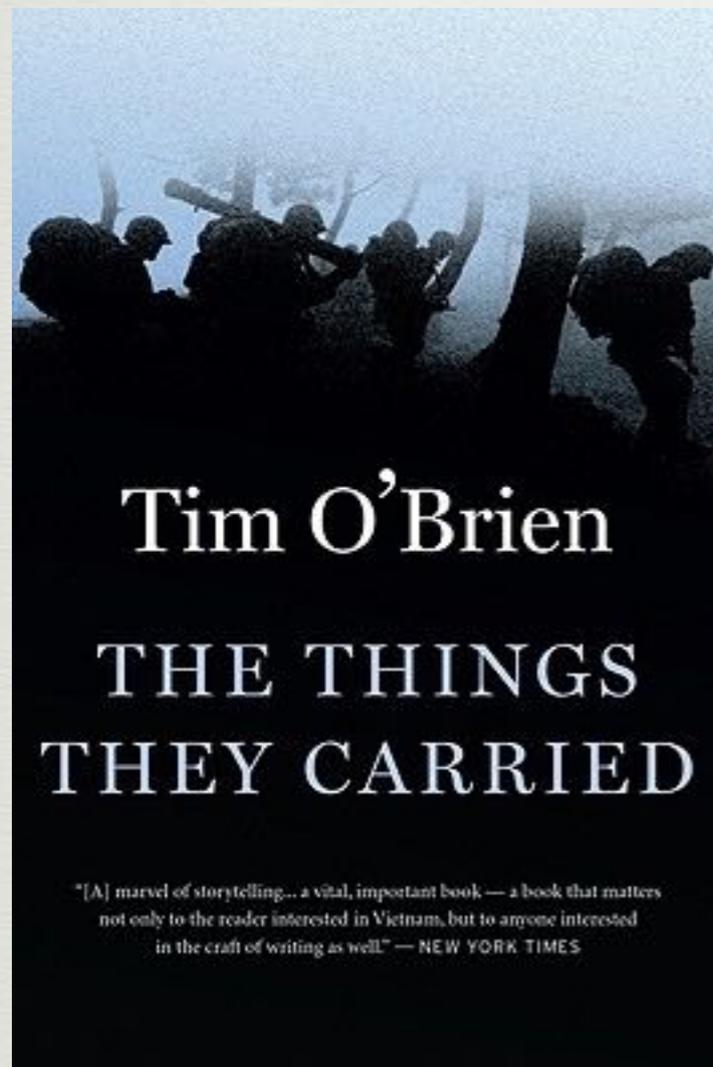


ENGLISH 1102 -  
INTRODUCTION TO  
LITERATURE

Class Notes

# The Lives of the Dead

by Tim O'Brien



O'Brien explains that stories can bring the dead back to life through the act of remembering. He describes the first dead body he saw in Vietnam, that of an old Vietnamese man. Others in the platoon spoke to the corpse in a mildly mocking way, but O'Brien could not even go near the body. The men proposed a toast to the dead man, but O'Brien would not join in. He tells Kiowa that the dead man reminded him of a girl he used to know.

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- O'Brien then segues into the story of a particular girl named Linda. Though O'Brien was only nine years old at the time, he believed he was in love with Linda, also age nine. He believed that their love was a mature love, not childish love. In spring of 1956, young O'Brien escorted Linda on their first date, chaperoned by O'Brien's parents. They went to a World War II movie whose premise was tricking the Germans by dumping the corpse of a soldier in a British officer's uniform and planting misleading documents on him. The premise upset O'Brien but he saw Linda smiling at the screen.

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- Linda began wearing the red cap she wore on their date to school, and her classmates teased her about it. O'Brien wishes that he would have stood up to her main instigator, Nick Veenhof, but he didn't. During class, Nick returned to his desk after sharpening his pencil and deliberately pulled off Linda's cap. Most of her hair was gone, and she wore a large bandage covering stitches across the back of her head. Linda suffered from a tumor in her brain, and she lived only through that summer. Nick told O'Brien that she had died, and O'Brien left school and went home. At home, he closed his eyes and tried to make her come back to life. In his mind, he saw her and she was healthy. She asked him why he was crying, and he answered that it was because she was dead. She told him to stop crying because it did not matter.

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- O'Brien then recalls how in Vietnam they had also had ways to make the dead seem alive again through the way they walked and thought about the dead. They kept the dead alive with stories, like the stories of Ted Lavender's death and those Rat Kiley told and embellished.
- Returning to his memory of Linda, O'Brien describes how his father took him to the funeral home to view the body. O'Brien recalls how he made up stories so that Linda would appear in his dreams. They would talk and walk and ice skate in his dreams, and Linda would offer insights into life and death. At age 43, O'Brien still dreams Linda alive and he can see her in his dreams, as he can see Kiowa and Ted Lavender and others. Middle-aged O'Brien, a successful writer, realizes that he is trying to save his childhood self, Timmy, with a story.

# The Lives of the Dead

## by Tim O'Brien

- He **objectifies** his own experience, writing about himself alternating between the **first- and third-person narrative voices**.
- The author employs **language** and **storytelling** to postpone loss.
- The author bring characters back to life, imagining and animating them beyond the limits of tangible, sensory life. It is a kind of **escapism**, a way to think about a situation from another vantage point, to understand it in a different way.
- Throughout the novel, characters employ this kind of **mental escapism** when thinking of home and other memories because it provides a familiar comfort and a way to impose meaning on events.

# The Lives of the Dead

## by Tim O'Brien

- He offers readers a **story within a story** within a story.
- O'Brien recollecting the death of his childhood friend, Linda. This **layer of stories** characterizes the **power of stories** as **devices** for ordering the events of life and figuring out one's response to those events.
- O'Brien also revisits the problem of defining a "**war story**" as if it were a definitive **genre**. As the sequence of "O'Brien's" memories and O'Brien's stories unfold, the "war story" of the dead Vietnamese man gives way to become a story about love that demonstrates **the power of stories** to memorialize the dead.
- Symbolically, **memorials** are for the living more so than they are for the dead. They serve as reminders and as mediums for those who have lost someone or something to focus their grief on.

# The Lives of the Dead

## by Tim O'Brien

- **Memorials** exist at the intersection of the past and the present, and they also help the living remember that they are alive, which ultimately is the **denouement** (the final part) of this chapter and the novel: The stories serve to save Timmy's life.
- And the impetus for the stories in the first place is the deep longing "Tim" and "Timmy" feel, like Lt. Cross' longing for Martha's love, like Rat's despondent slaughter of the baby buffalo, and how these become "O'Brien's" **memorial** to the men of Alpha Company, bridging the temporal gap between **past and present** and the epistemological gap between **story and meaning**.

# Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin



- The unnamed narrator of the story discovers from a newspaper that his younger brother, Sonny, has been arrested for selling and using heroin. As he prepares to teach his algebra class, the narrator remembers Sonny as a young boy. His students, he realizes, could someday end up like Sonny, given the obstacles and hardships they face growing up in Harlem.
- The narrator simultaneously hates and pities Sonny's friend, who, despite his problems, makes it painfully clear to the narrator just how difficult Sonny's drug-addicted life has been and how difficult it will continue to be.
- The narrator never writes to Sonny in prison until the narrator's young daughter, Grace, dies. Sonny writes a long letter back to his brother in which he tries to explain how he ended up where he is. The two brothers then stay in constant communication. When Sonny gets out of jail, the narrator is there for him. He takes Sonny back to his own family's apartment.
- In an extended flashback, the narrator recalls how Sonny and their father used to fight with each other because they were so similar in spirit. He remembers the last day he saw his mother while on leave from the army, when she told him to watch out for his brother. She told him that when his father was a young man, he watched his own brother get run down by a car full of white men who never bothered to stop. The experience traumatized and damaged the narrator's father for the rest of his life.

# Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

- After that conversation with his mother, the narrator went back into the army and didn't think about his brother again until their mother died. After the funeral, the two brothers sat and talked about Sonny's future. Sonny told his brother about his dream of becoming a jazz pianist, which the narrator dismissed. The narrator arranged for Sonny to live with his wife's family until Sonny graduated from college. Sonny reluctantly agreed to do so. He didn't want to live in the house and spent all his spare time playing the piano. Although Sonny loved the music, the rest of family had a hard time bearing his constant practicing.
- While living with his sister-in-law, Sonny got into trouble for skipping school. He tried to hide the truancy letters, but one eventually made it to the house. When his sister-in-law's mother confronted him, Sonny admitted to spending all his time in Greenwich Village, hanging out with musicians. The two fought, and Sonny realized what a burden he'd been on the family. After two days, Sonny joined the navy. The narrator didn't know whether Sonny was dead or alive until he received a postcard from Greece. After the war, the two brothers returned to New York, but they didn't see each other for quite some time. When they eventually met, they fought about Sonny's decisions in life. After one especially difficult fight, Sonny told his brother that he could consider him dead from that point on. The narrator walked away, telling himself that one day Sonny would need his help. The flashback ends there.
- After having Sonny live with him for a few weeks, the narrator debates whether he should search Sonny's room. As he paces back and forth, he sees a street-corner revival occurring outside his window and thinks about its significance. Eventually Sonny comes home and invites his brother to watch him perform later that evening. The two brothers go to a small jazz club where everyone knows and respects Sonny. Sonny and the band get on stage and play, and as they play, the narrator watches Sonny struggle with the music. He watches all his brother's struggles come pouring out as he plays, and only then does he finally realize who Sonny is and what he's made of.

# Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

- It is through the narrator's eyes that Sonny and Harlem are revealed.
- The narrator frames Sonny's struggles within a larger context, situating him with the poverty, crime and drug abuse that plague the entire community.
- Though the narrator is fully conscious of his community's dark side, he tries his best to keep those problems at arm's length, refusing to let any tragedy affect him too much emotionally.
- Unlike Sonny, the narrator has a difficult time expressing his ideas and emotions, and only when his young daughter dies does he open up and write to his brother.
- The narrator believes that he has been called upon to watch over Sonny, but this knowledge doesn't lessen the burden he feels. He is constantly torn by his emotions, which shift quickly from love to hate, concern to doubt. As much as he cares for Sonny, he seems unable to fully accept that his brother has the capacity for change.

# Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

- Sonny's one saving grace is his music, through which he can express all of his deep-seated longing and frustration.
- Sonny's music offers him a chance at redemption, but at the same time it also threatens to destroy him.
- To create music, Sonny has to bear the suffering and tragedies of his life and all the lives around him.
- He translates that suffering into an artistic expression that ultimately, even if only temporarily, redeems his audience.
- Sonny knows that playing music may destroy him by leading him back into a life of drugs, but he also knows that it's a burden he has to bear.
- The tension between the two brothers is so great, that after one particular fight, Sonny tells his brother to consider him dead from that point on, a statement that deliberately echoes the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel.

# Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

- Baldwin's **prose style of writing** is known for its **eloquence** and **rhetorical force**.
- The Bible was one of Baldwin's earliest influences. He constantly relies on **biblical imagery** and **phrases** to make his moral and political points.
- Baldwin's sentences also contain a **biblical tone** and **rhythm**.
- At the **heart of his writing** is a desire for peace and salvation, ideas that occur repeatedly throughout the Bible.
- Baldwin's style has been characterized for being too overbearing and direct in its use of **moral statements**.