
Illusions and Reality in *The Things They Carried* and *Greasy Lake*

The Things They Carried revolves around a couple of military men during the Vietnam war, each man carrying objects determined by 'necessity' and sharing the burden of war. The plot lies in Jimmy Cross's need to reinforce himself to battle reality, which is here distinctly segregated from the realm of imagination. The story of *Greasy Lake* breaks down the perception of what is cool and bad and shows the reality of the situation. The story centers on a group of young boys of privilege who represent twisted ideas of social rebellion, self-image, and masculinity. In both *The Things They Carried* and *Greasy Lake*, the protagonists of the stories are partially removed from the realities of their situations, trapped in their own world. To Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who is fighting a brutal war in Vietnam, Martha represents the safety and security of life at home. The narrator in *Greasy Lake* is not truly a 'bad boy' but is simply lost in an adolescent world of unhealthy self-image. However, through his "baptism" in the *Greasy Lake*, the haven of fun and enjoyment it once was, he rejects his bad aspirations, having thus gained the realistic view of life.

"His mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war...but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the jersey shore, with Martha carrying nothing." (O'Brien, 234). Though Jimmy Cross realizes that Martha does not love him, he is still obsessed with her. For him, Martha represents a necessary distraction, a means of surpassing the terror and violence of war. Jimmy Cross sees Martha in the exact same way in which soldiers in Vietnam think of the world back home; it is desirable and peaceful but also unreal. Unfortunately, Cross does not see an issue with what he is doing, his failure to recognize the reality of where he is causes him to lose mental focus on the battlefield. The result, as is demonstrated by the story, is deadly.

Jimmy Cross understands what might happen to him while on patrol and that he might not be able to go back to the innocence of life before the war. His thoughts turn toward unfulfilled dreams and desires to a young lady whom he doesn't know very well as a person, but still treats her almost as a pure figure and worships from afar. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Jimmy has assumed more into his relationship with Martha than what is truly there. "At dusk, he would carefully return the letters to his rucksack...then at full dark he would return to his whole and wonder if Martha was a virgin." (O'Brien, 232). Jimmy Cross constantly wonders if Martha is a virgin because he admires her as an untouched individual who stands for something pure, far from the horror and hate that he is exposed to every day in the war.

In *Greasy Lake* the lake is a place where the narrator and his friends escape from the constraints of his society and unleash their "bad boy" tendencies. There they can get high, drink, smoke and watch girls. "I understood what it was that bobbed there so inadmissibly in the dark. Understood and stumbled back in horror and revulsion...I was nineteen, a mere child, an infant, and here, in the space of five minutes I had struck down one greasy character and blundered into the waterlogged carcass of a second" (Boyle, 308). Running into the lake to escape his encounter with reality, the narrator hits reality again in the form of a corpse floating into the water. The lake changes from a place of harmony to one of fear. However, it's not really the lake itself who changes but the men who go there. The lake and the characters are bound

together through their similarities. The lake is described as “fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans” (Boyle, 306). The characters are also described as being “greasy” or “dangerous” several times throughout the story.

The freedom Greasy Lake promises sources the narrator and his friends’ reckless actions and the threatening situation they get themselves into. The lake offers the illusion of liberating from traditional masculinity; however, in reality, it shows that behaving without constrictions can lead to dreadful consequences. These consequences can include death and that is what awaits the narrator as a “bad character”. In experiencing the horror of the dead man, the narrator has matured and 'seen the light' of acting morally. By the end of the story, the lake has a darker tone and is probably not a place where the narrator will feel safe again.

There are some illusions that dive us deeper into reality and make us face our deepest fears. The way that Jimmy Cross invests so much time into 'pretending' and creating fantasies of love between himself and Martha indicates how important escapism is for him. One of Cross's soldiers dies due to his escapist daydreams and forces him to abandon these fantasies. His emotional attachments provided a relief from his current reality. He can only feel human when he's allied to the world back home, even though he's so separate from it in many ways. A late-night struggle leads to encounter with a dead body, causing the main character in Greasy Lake to reflect upon his wild lifestyle. Both stories show the maturation of the main characters through violence, though in different forms. In the course of that day, life has gotten real for both characters.