

## COMMON CORE

## Ambush

Short Story by Tim O'Brien

## Meet the Author

Tim O'Brien born 1946

Over and over again, Tim O'Brien has presented characters who are marked by the Vietnam War. From an infantryman on his first tour of duty, to a veteran struggling to readjust to his hometown, to an antiwar radical obsessed with death, his protagonists bring to life the complex issues raised by the war.

**Opening New Doors** O'Brien's writing career began at an early age. One day he fled from humiliation in the Little League to the Worthington, Minnesota, library. There he found the book *Larry of the Little League*, and soothed himself by writing an imitation of it. The library's other books became an escape from "loneliness and frustration" and an outlet for O'Brien's fertile imagination. O'Brien realized that fiction would let him experience "what could have been or should have been."

**A Critical Choice** As a young man, O'Brien faced another new door. He returned from four years at Macalaster College, where the Vietnam War was on students' minds, to find a draft notice waiting for him. O'Brien, who opposed the war, struggled mightily with his conscience

and even considered fleeing the country to avoid service. In the end, he could not bring himself to run, and he reported for duty.

**What Can You Teach?** O'Brien was an army infantryman from 1968 to 1970, seeing combat in Vietnam's Quang Nai province and receiving a Purple Heart. After the war, he studied at Harvard University, worked as a reporter for the *Washington Post*, and began writing novels. He asked himself, "What can you teach people, just for having been in a war?" He concluded that he could offer insight into the "complexity and ambiguity of a set of moral issues—but without preaching a moral lesson." O'Brien's nine books have all been connected to Vietnam and have vividly explored "its aftermath and effect on the human heart and mind."

**Higher Ambitions** Even after great success—a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize nomination—O'Brien still hopes to achieve more. He'd like to write a bestseller, and he works at it every day, no matter what. "You shape your own universe," he has said. "You practice all the time, then practice some more."

## Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML11-1194

## DID YOU KNOW?

Tim O'Brien . . .

- described his own experiences fighting in Vietnam in the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*.
- wrote stories about a fictional character, also named Tim O'Brien, in *The Things They Carried*.
- does not actually have a daughter, as the fictional Tim O'Brien does.

## ● TEXT ANALYSIS: CONFLICT

A story's **conflict** is the struggle between opposing forces that is the basis of the story's plot. **External conflict**—a struggle between a character and some outside force—is usually easy to identify in a work of fiction. **Internal conflict**—a struggle within a character—may be more subtle and complex. For example, an internal conflict may revolve around a decision a character has to make, or it may be reflected in behavior that is contradictory. As you read this story, watch for the development of internal conflicts in the main character.

## ● READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE

The **structure** of a literary work is the way in which it is put together—the arrangement of its parts. Tim O'Brien's story "Ambush" includes a **frame story**, or a story within a story. The first paragraph provides a frame—the narrator recalls answering a question his daughter once asked him. In the second paragraph, he begins to recount in a **flashback** an experience he had earlier, during the war. As you read, use a chart like the one below to summarize what happens within the outer story and the inner story.

*Beginning of Story 1:*

*Beginning of Story 2:*

*Middle of Story 2:*

*End of Story 2:*

*End of Story 1:*



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## *How does the PAST affect the present?*

Perhaps more than any group in society, war veterans carry a difficult past. Some remember combat experiences vividly, some block them out entirely. The lucky ones find a way to reconcile their past with the present, to use the lessons of battle to inform their present perceptions and choices.

**QUICKWRITE** Think about war veterans you know or have heard about. They might have served in Vietnam, in the Persian Gulf, or in an international peacekeeping mission. Imagine one specific way in which a veteran's past experiences might affect his or her present life. How might they affect a father's relationship with his children, for example? Write down your thoughts and discuss them in a group.



# Ambush

Tim O'Brien

**BACKGROUND** “Ambush” is a short story based upon the writer’s combat experiences in Vietnam. The Vietnam War lasted nine years, left 58,000 Americans dead, and left another 365,000 Americans wounded. Although they were better equipped and trained than the enemy, American troops fought in an unfamiliar landscape for a cause that many of them did not support or understand. Vietnamese Communists were skilled guerilla fighters whose tactics created a climate of frustration, confusion, and fear. American soldiers never knew when an attack might come and were haunted by their memories long after the war.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What **tone** is conveyed by this image?

When she was nine, my daughter Kathleen asked if I had ever killed anyone. She knew about the war; she knew I’d been a soldier. “You keep writing these war stories,” she said, “so I guess you must’ve killed somebody.” It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right, which was to say, “Of course not,” and then to take her onto my lap and hold her for a while. Someday, I hope, she’ll ask again. But here I want to pretend she’s a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories: **A**

He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him—afraid of something—and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him. **B**

### **A** CONFLICT

Reread lines 1–8. What **internal conflict** does the narrator face in the first paragraph?

### **B** ANALYZE STRUCTURE

Reread lines 9–11. How does the **setting** of the story shift in the second paragraph?



## Targeted Passage

*The Green Machine* (1977), Frank Dahmer.  
Screenprint on paper, 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" × 17<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>".  
© National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum.



Or to go back: **C**

Shortly after midnight we moved into the ambush site outside My Khe. The whole platoon was there, spread out in the dense brush along the trail, and for five hours nothing at all happened. We were working in two-man teams—one man on guard while the other slept, switching off every two hours—and I remember it was still dark when Kiowa shook me awake for the final watch. The night was foggy and hot. For the first few moments I felt lost, not sure about directions, groping for my helmet and weapon. I reached out and found three grenades and  
20 lined them up in front of me; the pins had already been straightened for quick throwing. And then for maybe half an hour I kneeled there and waited. Very gradually, in tiny slivers, dawn began to break through the fog, and from my position in the brush I could see ten or fifteen meters up the trail. The mosquitoes were fierce. I remember slapping at them, wondering if I should wake up Kiowa and ask for some repellent, then thinking it was a bad idea, then looking up and seeing the young man come out of the fog. He wore black clothing and rubber sandals and a gray ammunition belt. His shoulders were slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. He seemed at ease. He carried his weapon in one hand, muzzle down, moving without any hurry up the center  
30 of the trail. There was no sound at all—none that I can remember. In a way, it seemed, he was part of the morning fog, or my own imagination, but there was also the reality of what was happening in my stomach. I had already pulled the pin on a grenade. I had come up to a crouch. It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low. I tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach, which tasted like lemonade, something fruity and sour. I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away—just evaporate—and I leaned back and felt my mind go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the  
40 grenade before telling myself to throw it. The brush was thick and I had to lob it high, not aiming, and I remember the grenade seeming to freeze above me for an instant, as if a camera had clicked, and I remember ducking down and holding my breath and seeing little wisps of fog rise from the earth. The grenade bounced once and rolled across the trail. I did not hear it, but there must've been a sound, because the young man dropped his weapon and began to run, just two or three quick steps, then he hesitated, swiveling to his right, and he glanced down at the grenade and tried to cover his head but never did. It occurred to me then that he was about to die. I wanted to warn him. The grenade made a popping noise—not soft but not loud either—not what I'd expected—and there was a puff of dust  
50 and smoke—a small white puff—and the young man seemed to jerk upward as if pulled by invisible wires. He fell on his back. His rubber sandals had been blown off. There was no wind. He lay at the center of the trail, his right leg bent beneath him, his one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole. **D**

**C ANALYZE STRUCTURE**

In terms of the structure of this story, what does this line signal?

**D ANALYZE STRUCTURE**

Summarize what happens in lines 13–53. How do these lines relate to the first paragraph of the story?



*Come a Little Closer* (1997), Michael Brostowitz. Oil on board, 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  19 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". © National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum.

It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way.

Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me that it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed.

60 None of it mattered. The words seemed far too complicated. All I could do was gape at the fact of the young man's body. **E**

Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog. **F**

**E CONFLICT**  
Reread lines 54–61. What **internal conflict** does the narrator express?

**2 Targeted Passage**

**F CONFLICT**  
How does the vision the narrator imagines in lines 63–68 help resolve his conflict?

## Comprehension

- Recall** What does the narrator tell his daughter when she asks if he ever killed someone?
- Summarize** What happened to the narrator outside My Khe?
- Clarify** What vision does the narrator sometimes see in his mind?

## Text Analysis

- Examine Conflicts** Identify the **internal conflicts** the narrator experiences in this story. How would you describe the way he resolves or tries to resolve them? Explain your answer.
- Analyze Structure** What does the **frame** contribute to the impact of this story? Consider what would be lost without the first and last paragraphs.
- Interpret Title** In what ways does the title “Ambush” relate to the events of the story? Think about the frame as well as the inner story.
- Evaluate a Character’s Actions** Kiowa tells the narrator that this “was a good kill.” Do you agree? In your opinion, can there be a “good kill”?
- Apply Theme** What does this story suggest about the effects of the **past** on the present?
- Compare Texts** Compare “Ambush” and “Why Soldiers Won’t Talk” (page 1172) as portrayals of a soldier’s experience. On a chart, note what each presents as the physical sensations and emotional aftereffects of war. Which piece—the story or the essay—had more impact on you? Why?

	<i>Physical Sensations</i>	<i>Emotional Aftereffects</i>
<i>“Ambush”</i>		
<i>“Why Soldiers Won’t Talk”</i>		

## Text Criticism

- Author’s Style** “Ambush” is a work of fiction, but the story reads like a nonfiction account of a true event. To readers who wonder how much of his work is actually true, O’Brien responds, “The literal truth is . . . irrelevant.” Do you agree? Does it matter that O’Brien the writer does not have a daughter and does not know whether he ever killed anyone?

### *How does the PAST affect the present?*

How does O’Brien’s story convey the effects of the past on the present? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.

### COMMON CORE

**RL 3** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story. **RL 5** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning, as well as its aesthetic impact.

## The Literary Legacy of War

Modernist writer Gertrude Stein once said, “War is never fatal but always lost. Always lost.” One after another, the wars of the 20th century forced Americans to reconcile their sense of patriotism with the disillusionment that naturally comes from facing the realities of modern warfare. If it is an artist’s job to find meaning, what meaning can be discerned from the act of war?

### Writing to Synthesize

Each of the texts you have just read presents a variety of ideas and images in response to World War II and the Vietnam War. What do these pieces have in common? Reread the selections, pulling words or phrases from each that you find especially compelling—whether beautiful, ugly, moving, or surprising. When you have gathered 15–30 phrases, combine them artfully to create a poem that delivers a coherent impression about war. Your poem might tell a story, describe an image, or deliver a set of thoughts or pronouncements. It can take place on the battlefield or on the home front.

#### Consider

- what primary thought or feeling you were left with after reading all of the texts
- which parts of each selection had the strongest impact on you
- how to arrange the phrases in a way that communicates your own response to the texts

### Extension

**SPEAKING AND LISTENING** Give an oral reading of your poem, using your voice, posture, and gestures to emphasize its meaning. If you think it would be effective, consider performing a choral reading with some of your classmates or setting your poem to music.

#### COMMON CORE

**W 9** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. **SL 6** Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

American soldiers in Vietnam

