The Things We Carry With Us

Imagine as a middle school student, or maybe even high school, the popular girl in school tells you that you look nice. Or, imagine your great grandmother giving you something that was special to her, and she is passing it down to you. Both examples are memories that can be carried. Compliments from the popular girl make you feel good about your appearance, and the gift from your grandmother is something you will cherish forever. Many of us have things, both tangible and intangible, that we carry with us. Whether it be the words from a friend, or a sentimental item from a loved one, it is always with us. This idea of carrying these things with us is demonstrated in two stories, Miranda July’s “Birthmark,” and Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried.” Both stories show how the things that stick with us are the things that shape who we are by the way we see ourselves, the way we act, and how we overcome life’s many challenges.

Many of us like to hear nice comments about ourselves. We may not admit it, but the occasional compliment makes us feel better and boosts our self-esteem. While receiving compliments is nice, sometimes they do not roll off the tongue like the speaker intended it to, and you are offended rather than complimented. These back-handed compliments are something that most of us, more than likely, wind up carrying with us changing the way we look at ourselves. Many of us already view ourselves differently, sometimes more harshly, than others. Add on a back handed compliment, and you are headed for low self-esteem. This, then, leads to a
life of not feeling good enough as you are, and being stressed out (Tartakovsky). This concept is demonstrated in Miranda July’s “Birthmark.” Although the narrator no longer has the birthmark, she still carries the feelings it brought with her. Everything she does or does not do revolves around the birthmark. “Nineteen ninety-eight was the year lasers came to the people as good bread, eat and be full, be finally perfect. Oh yes, perfect. She didn’t think she would have bothered if she hadn’t been what people called “very beautiful except for” (para 2). This passage suggests that by implying that she was “very beautiful except” for her birthmark, the narrator felt incomplete and imperfect with it. Because those close to her pointed out her flaws, she felt that she had to remove it to be herself, to be whole, to be accepted by society.

The concept of others’ words shaping how you look at yourself is summed up in the following passage talking about a special group of people, meaning those with imperfections.

“This is a special group of citizens living under special laws. Nobody knows what to do with them. We mostly want to stare at them like the optical illusion of a vase made out of the silhouette of two people kissing. Now it is a vase ... now it could only be two people kissing ... oh, but it is so completely a vase. It is both! Can the world sustain such a contradiction? Only this was better, because as the illusion of prettiness and horribleness flipped back and forth, we flipped with it. Now we were uglier than her, now we were lucky not to be her, oh but then again, at this angle she was too lovely to bear. She was both, we were both, and the world continued to spin.” (para 2).

This passage demonstrates how the narrator feels about her birthmark, and how she believes the world looks at her with it. She does not feel completely beautiful, or horrible. Like society does, she flips back and forth from feeling beautiful to feeling horrible about her
appearance based on what society tells her. She feels incomplete, and that is how society looks at her. Having people tell her that she is “beautiful, except” is something that the narrator carries with her. She ultimately lets what other people say about her shape the way she looks at herself.

Secondly, the things we carry around with us affect how we act. Looking at Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” we see how the things we carry with us, such as letters and love for others, shapes how we act. In this story, two elements influence the way Jimmy Cross acts. First, Jimmy Cross is in “love” with Martha. He carries the letters she writes him with him in the war. “They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping” (389). The one thing that Lieutenant Cross had to hold on to was the hope that maybe Martha would one day return his feelings. This hope caused him to spend all his free time, and time that he was supposed to be leading his men, thinking about Martha and what could be. He would spend his days pretending that they were an actual couple and the letters he received from her were actually love letters, not just letters from a friend. “After a day’s March, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips….More than anything he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her” (389). This obsession he had for Martha is what keeps him going during the hard times at war, but it is also what leads to a friend’s death. He cares more about the letters, and Martha than for his friends’ lives. This is evident in this passage by the way he treats the letters when handling him. He is very careful to not get them dirty by holding them by the corners, yet he does not pay that much attention to what his men are doing. As a First Lieutenant, it is his job to lead his group of specialized weapons platoons, a job that if not done correctly could be very dangerous and could result in deaths (U.S.).
Second, in this story Jimmy Cross blames himself for the death of his fellow soldier and friend, Ted Lavender. Along with his letters, and his hope for Martha’s love, Jimmy Cross carries the death of his friend around with him. He sees himself as the one to blame for his friend’s death, “it was a bright morning in mid-April. Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself” (391). He blames himself because he was preoccupied with thoughts of Martha, “Lieutenant Cross kept to himself. He pictured Martha’s smooth young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her” (391). Losing someone close to you is something most of us would likely never forget, but to lose someone close to you and to feel like you are the one to blame, that is something that will affect him for the rest of his life. Jimmy Cross let his wants and needs come before those of his fellow soldiers, the men he was supposed to lead and protect. His actions, or inactions, will forever change how he feels and acts in the future.

Lastly, the most important lesson from both stories is that the things we carry eventually help us to overcome life’s obstacles. Despite what society said, and despite what the characters thought of themselves, they let go of their insecurities and obsessions and overcame their trials. Looking at the narrator from “Birthmark,” once she finally let her insecurities go, she was able to love and be loved again. “In purplish-red. She wasn’t thinking anything, she wasn’t afraid, or disappointed, or worried. She was just looking at the stain the way you would look at yourself fifteen years after your own death. Oh, you again. Now it was obvious that it had always been there, just around the corner” (para 8). In the end, the narrator realizes that all along she had kept the birthmark with her. Though others could not see it, she still carried the feelings around that it brought. She could not let go of who she once was, who she was with the birthmark. The
birthmark did make her whole. Eventually she learns that the birthmark did not determine how others felt about her, including her husband. Ultimately she is the one who determines what others will think of her. “It was good. It somehow allowed them to have more. They could have a child now. There was a loose feeling in the air...He would stay on his knee, just like this. She would see him this way and understand” (para 9). Even with her port wine stain, the narrator found love and overcame her obstacles. With or without the stain, her husband still loved her. There was now room for happiness in her life.

Looking at Jimmy Cross’ story, the reader can see that Cross overcame his obstacles by letting go of Martha. “Henceforth when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the day dreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (400). Jimmy Cross realized what his actions had caused to happen and how devoted he must be to the here and now, to his job. The most important thing to him had to be what was happening right then, with his men. “On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Martha’s letters” (399). The things that he was carrying, the letters and hope for her to love him in return, had to be laid aside for what was most important. “Lieutenant Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead” (400). They love he now has is not one for a young girl; it for his men, so that he could lead them.

The things that we carry with us are not all bad. In both stories the characters found happy endings, and the true meaning of love. For one it was to love and be loved. For the other, Cross had to let go of what he thought was love and embrace the love of his brothers. We have to be careful when we do carry things around with us. Although nice words and sentimental items
can be comforting, sometimes those same things can hurt us in the long run. If there is anything to take from these two stories, it is this: The things that we carry around shape us into the people we become. These things can change the way we look at ourselves and the way we act, but they can also help us to overcome our obstacles if utilized correctly.
Works Cited


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