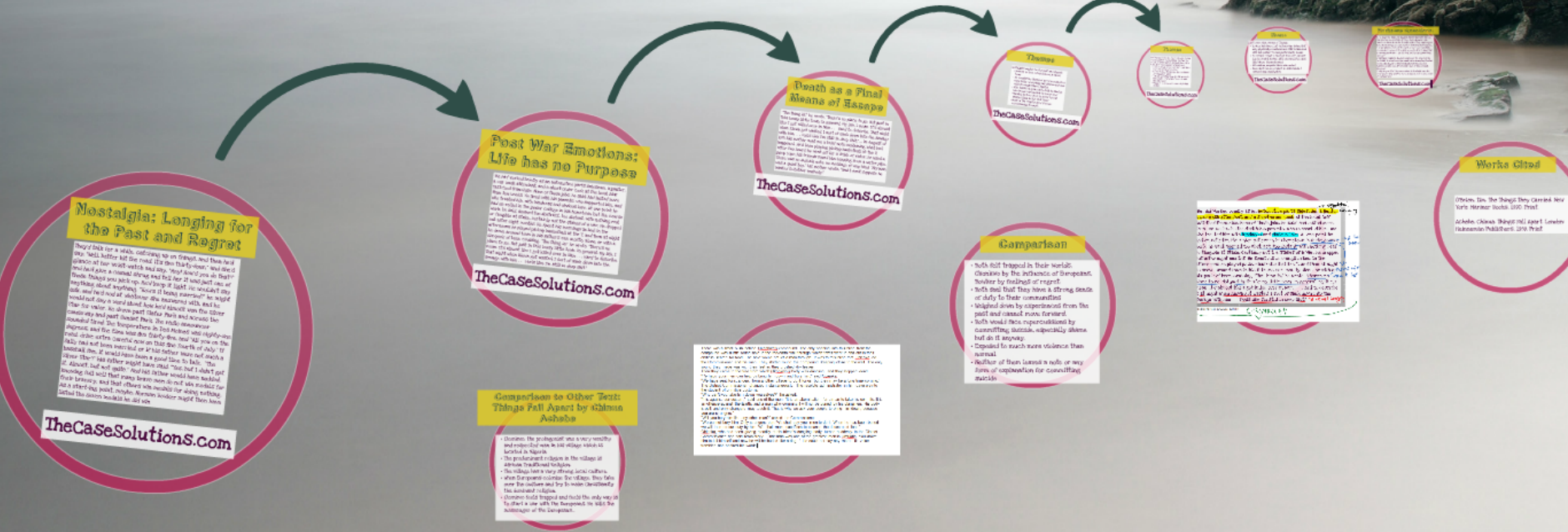


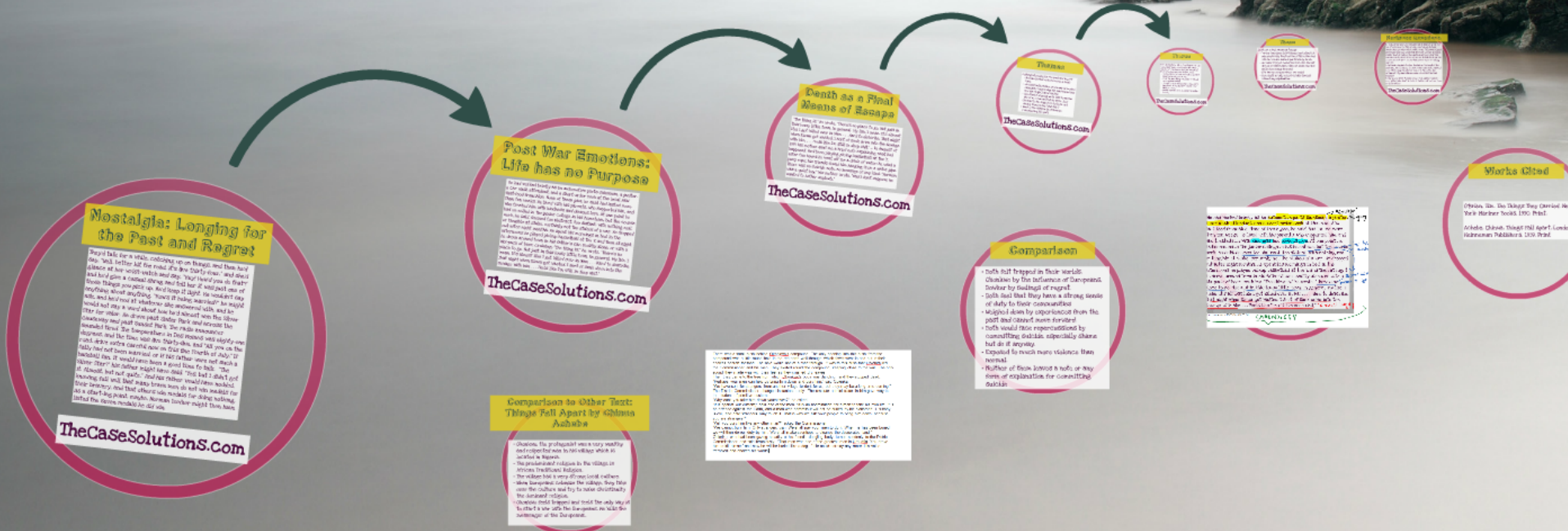
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Nostalgia: Longing for the Past and Regret

They'd talk for a while, catching up on things, and then he'd say, "Well, better hit the road, it's five thirty-four," and she'd glance at her wrist-watch and say, "Hey! How'd you do that?" and he'd give a casual shrug and tell her it was just one of those things you pick up. He'd keep it light. He wouldn't say anything about anything. "How's it being married?" he might ask, and he'd nod at whatever she answered with, and he would not say a word about how he'd almost won the Silver Star for valor. He drove past Slater Park and across the causeway and past Sunset Park. The radio announcer sounded tired. The temperature in Des Moines was eighty-one degrees, and the time was five thirty-five, and "All you on the road, drive extra careful now on this fine Fourth of July." If Sally had not been married, or if his father were not such a baseball fan, it would have been a good time to talk. "The Silver Star?" his father might have said. "Yes, but I didn't get it. Almost, but not quite." And his father would have nodded, knowing full well that many brave men do not win medals for their bravery, and that others win medals for doing nothing. As a starting point, maybe, Norman Bowker might then have listed the seven medals he did win.

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Post War Emotions: Life has no Purpose

He had worked briefly as an automotive parts salesman, a janitor, a car wash attendant, and a short-order cook at the local A&W fast-food franchise. None of these jobs, he said, had lasted more than ten weeks. He lived with his parents, who supported him, and who treated him with kindness and obvious love. At one point he had enrolled in the junior college in his hometown, but the course work, he said, seemed too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake, certainly not the stakes of a war. He dropped out after eight months. He spent his mornings in bed. In the afternoons he played pickup basketball at the Y, and then at night he drove around town in his father's car, mostly alone, or with a six-pack of beer, cruising. "The thing is," he wrote, "there's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him . . . Feels like I'm still in deep shit."

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Death as a Final Means of Escape

"The thing is," he wrote, "there's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him . . . Feels like I'm still in deep shit.".... In August of 1978 his mother sent me a brief note explaining what had happened. He'd been playing pickup basketball at the Y; after two hours he went off for a drink of water; he used a jump rope; his friends found him hanging from a water pipe. There was no suicide note, no message of any kind. "Norman was a quiet boy," his mother wrote, "and I don't suppose he wanted to bother anybody."

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Themes

Nostalgia/Longing for the past and Regret:

- Norman Bowker returns home, a small town.
- He constantly thinks of pre-war memories especially concerning his dead friend Max and his ex-girlfriend, Martha
- Also thinks of going up to talk to Martha who is now married but he never does
- Parallel to the regret he feels for not saving Kiowa in the "shit field."
- Most of the chapter is of Norman remembering the past.

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Themes

Post-war Emotions: Life has no Purpose: Similar to previous theme of nostalgia. Now that the war is over, the soldiers feel lost almost like there is no more purpose to their lives.

- Bowker thinks of past and what could have been had he not gone to war.
- Does the same thing every day. An almost meaningless routine.
- Almost everything from his life seems to backtrack to the incident from the shit field. The smell.
- Finally feels the need to escape by killing himself

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Theme

Death as a Final Means of Escape:

- Bowker has since left Vietnam war behind but only physically. Emotions are still in Nam and with his soldier friends particularly Kiowa.
- He cannot forget memories from war. Almost like he is still in Nam. Still can smell the shit field where Kiowa drowned.
- Life has no purpose since war ended
- Sees death as only resort so kills himself without any explanation.

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Harkness Questions.

1. "A good war story, he thought, but it was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink. They wanted good intentions and good deeds. But the town was not to blame, really." What do you make of the quote above? How does this explain how Bowker felt he had no one to talk to about his experiences at war? How did this lead to his committing suicide?
2. In these chapters, Bowker fixates on the smell of the shit field. Where else in the novel has a character fixated on certain imagery? What is similar between the two instances? Why does O'Brien make use of this sensual imagery?
3. Why do you think Norman Bowker felt suicide was the only option? Why didn't he leave a suicide note or some form of explanation?

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