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Selected Passage from “An Encounter”

“After an interval the man spoke to me. He said that my friend was a very rough boy and asked did he get whipped often at school. I was going to reply indignantly that we were not National School boys to be *whipped*, as he called it; but I remained silent. He began to speak on the subject of chastising boys. His mind, as if magnetized again by his speech, seemed to circle slowly round and round its new center. He said that when boys were that kind they ought to be whipped and well whipped. When a boy was rough and unruly there was nothing would do him any good but a good sound whipping. A slap on the hand or a box on the ear was no good: what he wanted was to get a nice warm whipping. I was surprised at this sentiment and involuntarily glanced up at his face. As I did so I met the gaze of a pair of bottle-green eyes peering at me from under a twitching forehead. I turned my eyes away again.

The man continued his monologue. He seemed to have forgotten his recent liberalism. He said that if ever he found a boy talking to girls or having a girl for a sweetheart he would whip him and whip him; and that would teach him not to be talking to girls. And if a boy had a girl for a sweetheart and told lies about it then he would give him such a whipping as no boy ever got in this world. He said that there was nothing in this world he would like so well as that. He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. He would love that, he said, better than anything in this world; and his voice, as he led me monotonously through the mystery, grew almost affectionate and seemed to plead with me that I should understand him.

I waited till his monologue paused again. Then I stood up abruptly. Lest I should betray my agitation I delayed a few moments pretending to fix my shoe properly and then, saying that I was obliged to go, I bade him good-day. I went up the slope calmly but my heart was beating quickly with fear that he would seize me by the ankles. When I reached the top of the slope I turned round and, without looking at him, called loudly across the field:

—Murphy!

My voice had an accent of forced bravery in it and I was ashamed of my paltry stratagem. I had to call the name again before Mahony saw me and hallooed the answer. How my heart beat as he came cunning across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little.” (27-28)

What Is The Importance of The Encounter?

What can a reader infer about a story from a single passage? How can a single event completely change a character and their views on two conflicting groups? The James Joyce's short story, "An Encounter," is about two boys who skip school and have a strange encounter with an old, perverted man. Early in the story, the narrator is portrayed as an intelligent, imaginative boy who lacks the impetuosity and physicality of his peers. He admires, adults, who behave in a manner similar to him, and looks down upon boys who possess the qualities he lacks. However, the encounter with the old man forces the narrator to change how he views adults and boys, as well as broaden and unfold his own qualities. This meeting with a potential predator is the catalyst which prompts the narrator to develop characteristics he did not initially possess, such as bravery and poise, and to broaden his current traits, such as intelligence, to adapt to the situation. The evolution in the narrator alters the relationships that he has with the old man and Mahony. He is forced to examine and re-evaluate his own feelings about adults and boys, who are represented by the old man and Mahony, respectively.

One of the characteristics of the narrator that evolves in this passage is the narrator's intelligence. Initially, the narrator uses his intelligence in an innocent manner. He is the main planner behind the boys' skipping school and exploring Dublin. However, in the above passage the narrator uses his intelligence in order to escape a more serious situation involving a potential predator. "Then I stood up abruptly. Lest I should betray my agitation I delayed a few moments pretending to fix my shoe properly" (27). Rather than running away abruptly and displaying his fear, the narrator demonstrates his intelligence by choosing a more subtle exit strategy in order not to alarm the old man or invoke a violent response. If the narrator had chosen otherwise, he might have offended the old man and incurred his wrath, which the narrator felt was a distinct possibility: "My heart was beating quickly with fear that he would seize me by the ankles" (28).

The encounter with the old man compels the narrator to apply his intellect to escape a serious situation that his peer, Mahony, is seemingly oblivious to.

Another characteristic of the narrator that develops is his poise. Throughout the story, the narrator seems apprehensive and describes himself as acting out of fear. He is hesitant to engage in the rough play with Mahony and the other boys. However, in this passage he forces himself to behave in a brave manner. When calling to Mahony after leaving the old man, the narrator says that, "My voice had an accent of forced bravery in it" (28). After his harrowing encounter with the old man, the narrator maintains his composure and conceals his fear of the man. If the narrator had not maintained his poise and calmness and revealed his true feelings, he would have risked offending the old man and being ridiculed by his peers. Since Mahony did not feel that the man was a threat, he might have interpreted the narrator's actions as an overreaction and a sign of cowardice.

Earlier in the story, the narrator reveals his yearning to fit in with his peers as the only reason he engages in rough, violent games with them. He knows that if he had run away and revealed that he was scared of a seemingly innocuous situation, he would be mocked by his peers. Despite his fear and anxiety, the narrator is mature enough to project an outward appearance of confidence in order to remain safe from the old man and to maintain his standing amongst his peers.

The narrator's desire for acceptance from adults changes in this passage. When the old man enters into the story, the narrator strives to achieve his acceptance. The narrator lies to the old man about having read the same books as the old man in order to give an impression that he is as intelligent and studious as the old man, who claims to look down upon boys, like Mahony, who prefer to play games rather than engage in academic interests. The purposeful lying shows his desire for the old man's approval as well as his own desire to be seen as superior to Mahony and to distinguish himself in the eyes of the old man. In other words, the narrator does this because he identifies more with adults than with other boys, because he feels that adults share his views

and can appreciate the qualities that would not make him popular amongst his peers. The narrator disapproves of rough play, impulsiveness and a lack of emphasis on academic endeavors, which is what Mahony represents. The old man expresses a similar sentiment: “He said that my friend was a very rough boy and asked did he get whipped often at school” (27). The old man shares the same attitude towards Mahony as the narrator has, which furthers the connection established between the old man and the narrator. The old man also appreciates the scholarly qualities of the narrator, which the narrator feels make him inferior to his peers because seeming to be “studious or lacking in robustness” (20) are considered detriments. Not only boys look down upon the narrator’s qualities, but girls as well. Mahony, who acts opposite of the narrator, has multiple sweethearts, while the narrator has none.

In the above passage, then, the narrator’s desire to please the old man is replaced by fear as a result of the man’s obsession with discipline and his accusation of lying. Earlier in their encounter, the narrator tells the old man that he has no sweethearts, which the old man responds to incredulously. When the old man takes on a more menacing, sterner tone with the narrator, he reveals his disbelief of the narrator’s claims: “And if a boy had a girl for a sweetheart and told lies about it then he would give him such a whipping as no boy ever got in this world. He said that there was nothing in this world he would like so well as that” (27). The accusation and threat by the old man disturb the narrator, and change his attitude towards adults. This encounter forces the narrator to realize that not all attention from adults is positive, and makes him re-evaluate his desire for their attention. Instead of being an asset, the narrator’s perceived maturity was detrimental because it garnered the attention of a pervert. If the narrator had behaved more like Mahony, who ignored the old man and followed his own rash desires, rather than seeking the old man’s attention and approval, the narrator probably would not have been exposed to the old man’s sadistic fantasies. This situation also compels the narrator to realize that he is not as mature as he wants others to think, and that there is virtue in immaturity.

The attitude of the narrator towards boys he views as inchoate changes tremendously after his encounter with the old man, which exposes the narrator's deficiencies. His new views affect his relationship of Mahony and how he views him. Throughout the story, the narrator and Mahony seem distant from each other. The narrator does not want to play the rough games with Mahony while exploring Dublin, and convinces Mahony to spare two younger boys from his rough play. The narrator also disapproves of Mahony bringing along his catapult. When the old man enters the story, the narrator is embarrassed by Mahony's lack of knowledge and reveals that he thinks Mahony is stupid. The narrator subtly projects his feelings of superiority to Mahony and looks down upon him. In the selected passage, the narrator feelings towards Mahony change. After escaping from the old man, the narrator calls for Mahony and is astonished by his swift response. "How my heart beat as he came running across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little"(28). The narrator reveals his true feelings about Mahony, who represents aspects of boyhood that the narrator greatly dislikes, such as violent play and lack of attention to education. Although Mahony embodies these aspects, the narrator does not despise Mahony; rather he dislikes certain characteristics of his.

In the course of the story, the narrator comes to realize that the traits Mahony exhibits, such as his physicality and impulsiveness, are beneficial. Even though the narrator is more intelligent than Mahony, his intelligence did not protect him from the old man. The narrator feels that these traits that he lacks would have been beneficial in dealing with the old man. Had the narrator been more like Mahony, he would have left rather than stay and indulge the old man in his fantasies, or he would not have felt as intimidated. Since Mahony has these traits, the narrator is grateful that he is there to protect him. This newfound appreciation of Mahony causes the narrator to re-evaluate his earlier feelings and makes him regret his views.

The selected passage gives insight into development of the narrator and helps the reader better understand his motivations. The passage shows both the qualities, such as intelligence, that

the narrator possesses, as well as those, such as bravery and physicality that he lacks. Also, a clear understanding of why the narrator is drawn to adults and resents children his own age is revealed. The encounter with the old man is the turning point in the story when the narrator's intelligence, poise, desire for adulation from adults, and negative views on other boys are about to change. The narrator relies on his intelligence in a more serious situation than he had previously done while developing a poise which he lacked earlier in the story. In addition to these changes, the narrator realizes that there are negative consequences to wanting acceptance from adults and that traits exhibited by many boys his age that he previously resented have their value. All of these major changes illustrate the immense significance of the encounter to the development of the narrator.

References:

Joyce, James. "An Encounter." The Dubliners. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. 19-28.