

Copy at your own peril: plagiarism in old school



Over 2,000 years ago, the philosopher Aristotle stated that with regards to “the origin of poetic art as a whole...the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood and so is the pleasure that all men take in works of imitation.” This depiction of poetry illustrates that the impulse to write is derived from an innate tendency to imitate the world around us, a tendency that all men take pleasure in. Similarly, this portrayal of plagiarism as a necessary prerequisite to works of art persists to this day, as Tobias Wolff discusses this idea in his piece *Old School* through the narrator’s struggles with plagiarism in a school with “a system of honors that valued nothing you hadn’t earned yourself,” an idea “so deeply held it was never spoken” (Wolff 4). This concept of original authorship is heavily contested in the novel, as Wolff provides insight into the positives and negatives of imitating other authors’ works. While indeed punishing the narrator for plagiarizing, Tobias Wolff still suggests that plagiarism stems from admiration for the original writer.

Wolff suggests that the narrator admires Susan Friedman after he plagiarizes from her story for his submission to the school literary contest. Although the narrator’s transgression is very typical of a schoolboy, his reason for plagiarizing is atypical – it has nothing to do with a fear of failure or desire to submit better work. Although he does desire to meet Hemingway, he legitimately believes that Susan Friedman’s story tells the story of his own life in a manner never framed before, as he states, “The whole thing came straight from the truthful diary I’d never kept” (125). Thus, the narrator sees the various “obvious parallels” from Susan’s life, and he feels a connection with Susan at such a high level that he states he himself “couldn’t tell us

apart" (125, 161). Consequently, when the narrator does submit Susan's story as his own, he feels that he is paradoxically representing himself truthfully for the first time in his life. By internalizing Susan's work as his own, he admires its similarity to his own life, conceding that he never believed Susan's story was " anything but his own" (142). The narrator believes this to be true because he believes that the story itself is disconnected from the writer, as he states: " The life that produces writing can't be written about. It is a life carried on without the knowledge of even the writer, below the mind's business and noise..." (156). Consequently, because the story is detached from the writer, as long as the story resembles the narrator's life, he feels no remorse at submitting it as his own. In an expressive interview with *The Missouri Review*, Tobias Wolff concurs: " It's often a very good, passionate reader who plagiarizes a story—someone whose connection with a given work becomes so powerful that his sense of it being " his" story...A story—a written story—is a series of black marks on a white page. That's it" (p. 12). As a result, the narrator's appreciation for Susan's work reinforces the idea that by plagiarizing her story, the narrator is acknowledging that the story is powerful and worthy enough to be plagiarized in the first place. Thus, Susan writes to the narrator, " Plagiarism, not imitation, is the sincerest form of flattery" (157). This clearly indicates that the narrator's plagiarism is sincere flattery - he truly admires Susan's writing style and emotional insights, and identifies with her story so much so that he doesn't even recognize he's plagiarizing in the first place. Wolff further suggests that plagiarism is a form of admiration of the original writers by portraying imitation as necessary for writers to learn how to write. In the same interview with the *Missouri Review*, Tobias Wolff proclaimed, " I

learned by imitating—and that’s fine. People don’t appreciate the extent to which writers need to imitate in order to get where they’re going, or how long the apprenticeship will be” (p. 13). By stating that he himself “learned by imitating” he lets all his readers know the motivation behind why he makes the narrator in *Old School* have all these experiences with plagiarism. Specifically, the narrator states, “I knew that Maupassant, whose stories I loved, had been taken up when young by Flaubert and Turgenev; Faulkner by Sherwood Anderson; Hemingway by Fitzgerald and Pound and Gertrude Stein” (156). As evident, the narrator concludes that all preeminent writers were, at one point, apprentices of other great writers before them. This period of apprenticeship often led to the apprentice imitation both the style and content of the master, as the narrator further concludes: “All these writers were welcomed by other writers. It seemed to follow that you needed such a welcome, yet before this could happen you somehow, anyhow, had to meet the writer who was to welcome you” (156). The fact that these distinguished writers “welcomed” new apprentices is the reason why there existed such a fierce competition to meet Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Ernest Hemingway throughout the literary contests in the novel. Even just the potential of meeting such exalted novelists causes such clash between students, indicating how much each student admired these luminaries and how valuable each student thought this meeting would be. In fact, the narrator himself learned from Ernest Hemingway, as he often typed out all of Hemingway’s stories. Moreover, the narrator imitated Hemingway to such an extent that he even “used the typewriter because Hemingway famously did,” and once “the final period smack[ed] home,” then the narrator felt “the joy of completion, the joy of Hemingway himself” (145). Thus, the

narrator reveres Hemingway to such an extent that he is capable of vicariously experiencing the joy the original author feels when he finishes his work. The narrator further divulges how much he owes his literary abilities to Hemingway when he states, “ I myself was in debt to Hemingway...I even talked like Hemingway characters” (156). This realization clearly delineates how the narrator has learned to write from imitating Hemingway, as he considers himself “ in debt to Hemingway” for everything that he has learned from him. In essence, the narrator’s imitations of Hemingway reflect the overall trend of writers imitating from their forerunners, another form of admiration for their work. In the same interview with the Missouri Review, Tobias Wolff entirely agrees: “[I]t’s rather flattering to be plagiarized.... the sort of plagiarist who does it for...advantage at school...is the dullest and most contemptible kind, and a very different thing from plagiarism of a creative work, which usually proceeds, paradoxically, from admiration” (p. 13). This quote lends insight into the mindset of Wolff, who believes that authorship that imitates other creative work stems from admiration from the original work, and Wolff consistently constructs the narrator’s experiences in Old School with regards to this theme.

Wolff contests that plagiarism, although a punishable act, is positive because it flatters the original writer, because the imitator often uses plagiarism to jumpstart his writing career. Essentially, Aristotle’s theory of imitation being intrinsic to human nature persists to this day, and he would approve of Tobias Wolff’s depiction of plagiarism in Old School. Wolff encourages us not to shy away from imitating outstanding writers in our own search and

development of becoming a better writer as we admire the great writers that came before us.

Works Cited

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