

Theme and style in "greasy lake" by coraghessan boyle essay



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In the short story "Greasy Lake," Coraghessan Boyle portrays the misconceptions that individuals, especially the youth, have about the appropriateness of portraying a tough and bad image. The story's three characters, Digby, Cornell, and the "wanna-be bad narrator" believe that it is fashionable to be bad. They try to project a bad-boy image because they think that is how tough gentlemen should be. The narrator confirms this notion from the onset when he states that "There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad" (Boyle 1). This attitude not only reflects the characters' distorted view of the ideal personal image, but brings them face-to-face to the harsh reality of the bad-boy behavior they so much desire to emulate. This is seen when they meet the real bad men at the Greasy Lake, who beat them up and destroy their car. In this regard, Boyle explores the dangers of having a distorted view of what is good or ideal in society. Towards this end, the author uses extensive imagery for the setting of the narrative, plus symbolism with ironical injections throughout the story. The author details the narrator's predictable downfall from his position of self-importance, which triggers a deeper understanding of himself, society, nature and the eventual shifting from his desire for rebellion into an appreciation of peace and societal norms.

The author uses various literary devices to portray the characters' desire to project bad-boy image. The narrator tells that his friend, Cornell, allowed his parents to pay for his college tuition (p. 1). This statement is ironical because the idea of allowing one's parents to pay college tuition suggests that he's doing them a favor. Ideally, one should be grateful when parents pay their school fees. However, Cornell makes it appear that he doesn't care about

college, and that he is doing his parents a favor by letting them pay his tuition. This attitude is intended to show his bad-boy image and make him fit in the group of his equally "bad" friends. At the same time, the three characters pretend that they don't give a damn about social norms, when in reality they don't have the heart to be tough. This is evidenced when they are scared by the biker and Bobby at the Greasy Lake. The narrator describes him as "a very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots" (Boyle 2). The irony of the situation is that the narrator, who is supposedly a bad character, describes Bobby as "very bad." This suggests that the narrator has realized that he and his friends are just pretenders trying to project a bad-boy image. In fact, their understanding of "Bad Boy" image is artificial because they try to show it outwardly through their dressing, while inwardly they are timid and mild-mannered teenagers enjoying the financial support of their parents. The narrator states that "we wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether" (Boyle 1). This description of their dressing and behavior was nothing more than pretense. They were imitating what they thought bad boys do by dressing and walking around accordingly. However, they lacked the inner toughness of bad boys like Bobby, who showed it through his physical strength. The narrator tells of him that "my antagonist was shirtless, and a single cord of muscle flashed across his chest as he bent forward to peel Jeff from his back like a wet overcoat" (Boyle 2). This description of their antagonist shows that the narrator was beginning to realize that their self perception was distorted; they did not possess the qualities of true bad boys.

The author also uses symbolism to show that the characters' notions of bad boy image were distorted. Their car was old and rickety, and it symbolized their mild-manners and faint hearts. The old car is a symbol of their shaky character because they fail to live up to their bad boy image when attacked at the lake. They are beaten and scared into hiding. Their fears show that they have not "come of age" as far as being bad is concerned. The lake is also symbolic of their eroded moral values. Inwardly they are harmless college teenagers who are abusing the privilege of their high-class social status. Their only shortcoming is their distorted belief that it is good to be bad. Likewise, the lake's beauty has been overshadowed by the wastes that were dumped there. The narrator says such words about the lake that was once beautiful: "now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires" (Boyle 2). This statement suggests that the lake's beauty is disguised by the ugly scene created by the dumped wastes. In the same manner, the characters' innocence is masked by their pretentious bad boy image. They are innocent and harmless, but they pretend to be bad and tough.

The characters' turning point comes when they are confronted by Bobby and the biker at the lake. After their ordeal, they realize that they are not only unfit to be bad (their opponents are more bad than they are), but that their behavior is against societal norms. It dawns on them that their bad boy behavior will only land them in trouble as evidenced by the destruction of the narrator's car. Consequently, they are not excited, as they would usually do, when the new girl who arrives at the scene calls them "some pretty bad characters" (Boyle 3). Not surprisingly, they turn down the girl's offer of

drugs and invitation to party together. This suggests that the characters have finally learnt their lesson and decided to conform to appropriate societal norms. As the narrator concludes, they finally realize that sometimes " it is okay to be Good Boys."