

The greater santini: positives and negatives of ben's coming of age



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Pat Conroy's *The Great Santini* is not only the story of the difficult relationship between Bull Meecham and his son, Ben, but also the coming-of-age tale of Ben. The book was based in a time of great change. During the 1960's there was much confliction between the stern values of a previous generation and the more open-minded, sensitive nature of a new one, which was often seen as anarchic and weak. We see the confliction of the era mirrored and even enhanced in the Meecham household, where the children's defense against their Marine father's abuse is often seen by Bull as disrespect and disobedience. The novel focuses on the maturation of the eldest Meecham child, Ben. Throughout the book, the reader follows Ben as he encounters many people and events that influence his ascent into manhood. Mrs Meecham, Mr. Dacus, and of course Bull all serve to guide Ben, but these lessons are not always learned through positive example.

Lillian Meecham is what the reader would consider Bull's foil. She is extremely passive, thoughtful, and sweet. She rarely stands up to her husband, and has endured being the victim of his abuse for years because she still sees the good in him, even when her children do not. She has instilled in her children, particularly Ben, a fundamental kindness which Bull lacks and sees as weakness. Lillian hopes for her children to become better people than Bull, and even asks Toomer, the help's son, to take Ben under his wing and teach him to be a gentleman. Unlike her husband, Lillian is not a proponent of fighting at all, and when Ben gets into a quarrel at school, Lillian is worried that she has failed as a mother and complains, "' I thought I was doing a better job than that of making you into something a bit more civilized... You obviously have more of your father in you than I thought',"

(Conroy, 167). Although generous and loving, Lillian also has a passiveness which forces Ben to learn courage as well. When Bull begins kicking Lillian for siding with the children after his basketball loss to Ben, Ben defends his mother regardless of the consequences.

Mr Dacus, Ben's basketball coach and principal has always been supportive and understanding of Ben's situation. When the Meecham children first arrive at their new school and Ben gets into a confrontation with another student for defending his friend, Mr Dacus takes the time to listen to Ben and allows him to defend himself: something Ben has never been able to do at home with his father. Dacus assures Ben that he will not be penalized for what has ensued and that he will "' call your father and explain. He'll understand after I tell him the whole story. Leave him to me...don't worry about your father'," (162). Ben takes solace in opening up to Mr Dacus throughout the book in a way that he never could with his father, and in turn Dacus views and treats Ben as a son. We see this when Ben is sent to prison for a prank, and when his own father will not bail him out, Mr Dacus comes to the rescue and even allows him to stay the night. Mr Dacus is one of the few non-marine men in Ben's life, which is refreshing and important to him, because he has so many expectations put on him at home to follow in his father's footsteps. His presence and influence in Ben's life give Ben a sense of normalcy, and a male role model who is not hostile or rough: someone who not only cares, but shows it.

It is obvious that Ben's own father, Bull, has had a tremendous impact on Ben and the man he becomes, sometimes for the worse, and sometimes for the better. As Conroy states in the book summary, "{Bull Meecham is} a <https://assignbuster.com/the-greater-santini-positives-and-negatives-of-bens-coming-of-age/>

man you should hate, but a man you will love.”. We can infer that Ben feels the same sort of bittersweet emotions towards his father. He resents Bull for the way he has treated their family, for the abusiveness he displays towards Lillian, for his self-righteousness and hot temper and for his ultimate excessive harshness. However, Ben also recognizes the honorable qualities that “The Great Santini” possesses: he is brave, he strives for the best, he is respected and noble and strong, and he loves his family more than they know. Conroy sugarcoats nothing when he tells the stories of Bull Meecham. The reader feels embarrassed when Bull comes to Ben’s basketball game drunk and pressures his son into fouling another player, the reader feels anger when Bull loses his temper and physically assaults Lillian or Ben. The reader feels happy for the family and for Bull when he and Lillian spoil their children with gifts on Christmas, when Bull insists on buying Mary Anne a new dress for the dance to make her feel special, when he gives Ben his jacket to show him how much he loves him. But on top of that, the reader feels pity for Bull. It is apparent that he does not know how to separate how he expresses his love for the military and its men, from how he expresses his love towards his children and wife. Mr Dacus sums it up perfectly when he advises Ben; “I’ve seen a lot of Marine fathers since I’ve been at the high school, Ben...They love their families with their hearts and souls and they wage a war against them to prove it. All your dad is doing is loving you by trying to live his life over again through you. He makes bad mistakes, but he makes them because he is part of an organization that does not tolerate substandard performance. He just sometimes forgets there’s a difference between a Marine and a son,” (387). Regardless of the events he has faced and the struggles he has pushed through, by the end of *The Great Santini* we

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see Ben Meecham becoming a man. He has not figured his whole life out yet, but we see him start to understand and evolve.

Bull, who arguably has the most vested interest in Ben out of anyone in Ben's life, was never able to see his son become a man. But perhaps the worst tragedy of all- the loss of his father- allowed Ben to appreciate the good qualities in " The Great Santini" more than he ever could before. The good and the bad that Ben had to see from the people closest to him (Lillian, Mr Dacus, and Bull) are what formed him into the man that he is.