

Free characterization, theme, and symbolism in elizabeth baines essay example

[Family](#), [Father](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“Compass and Torch”

In Elizabeth Baines', "Compass and Torch", an eight year old boy, ready for the camping trip with his father that he has not seen in four months, listens as his mother mocks the idea of camping on a mountain side with an eight year old that his father cannot relate to, to her new boyfriend Jim. As the boy is packing for his trip, he comes into the kitchen with his torch and reluctantly hands it to Jim, who checks it to make sure it is in working order for the boy. Throughout the story's entirety, the central theme of the boy's desperate attempt to reconnect with his father plays out. There are numerous symbolic references throughout the story pertaining to the relationship between father and son and Baines portrays each with attentive detail.

The red torch, an item the boy is so proud to have and show off to his father, is compared to a sword that a warrior carries as Baines states, "it's better to have it for a proper purpose, to put it away, to carry it carelessly but with meaning, as a warrior might carry his sword" (Baines, 7). This quote reflects the fact that the boy is trying to define for himself the reasoning behind his father's lackluster response to the boy's torch. He wonders why his mother and her boyfriend Jim took more notice than his own father, so he tries to make a play of nonchalance to seem like it's no big deal. When the boy asks his father if he had also brought a torch for their expedition, the father replies that yes, he had brought a torch, a green one. The boy stops short on this thought, that his father's torch might trump his, but he father insists that having two torches is better than having only one. Having two torches is referring to having two father figures in the boy's life. Even though the boy is

apprehensive when dealing with Jim, he tries to force himself into realizing that two is in fact, better than one.

When the boy's father realizes that he has forgotten his compass, and the boy realizes that he too, has forgotten his compass, he also tries to place blame on the reasons he has forgotten his compass: his mother. The boy's visual coherence of seeing his father's disappointment in himself for forgetting such a key tool for their adventure, made the boy upset at his mother for not believing that his own father did not have enough common sense to look after or look out for his own son. The moment in the car, with his mother's teary eyed face scolding his father about safety precautions made the boy feel guilty about taking the trip in the first place, and made him not want to go in order to save his father from the added humiliation from his mother and Jim's harsh judgment. When the boy's father's demeanor about the compass situation suddenly changes, the boy explains, "it is no accident that they both left their compasses behind", attesting to the fact that they were not needed on an adventure such as this one (Baines, 7). The boy's view of only needing his father's guidance as they journey up the mountain is symbolic of the ascent into manhood for the boy.

Throughout the entire story, the boy's father seems preoccupied, even though his son is continually rambling on about everything he sees his father do and everything he feels may impress his father. The son is inherently oblivious to his surroundings, even though the beautiful landscape all around them is being described throughout the story. Both parties seem rushed in their efforts to bond with one another. There is a dappled grey wild horse roaming about the man and the boy while they unpacked their supplies from

the boot of their car. The horse, consistently nudging the man while he hurriedly tries to speed up the rate of their adventure, is repeatedly batted away by the man, and going almost completely unnoticed by the boy. The horse is symbolic to their relationship, the horses' calm, natural presence is contrasting to the chatter filled, anxiety filled camping trip. The boy is persistent in his cries for attention, and the father is so engrossed in the thought of losing the relationship with his son because of the separation that he is pushing his son away, without even realizing it. Both the boy and the father are so busy dreaming up what their relationship should be like instead of enjoying the company of one another that they fail to notice their surroundings, the landscape and the horses.

Throughout the story, "Compass and Torch", Baines depicts a young boy, in need of guidance while seeking out a father's approval and a disillusionment in doing so. The young boy and his father's changeless disposition throughout the story characterizes that regardless of what a desired outcome may be, it will never change if they themselves do not change their ways. The continued symbolism of the torch, the compass and the wild horse paint a vivid picture of the oblivious nature of people in an attempt to connect on a deeper level rather than slowing down and enjoying what is right in front of them.

Works Cited

Baines, Elizabeth. *Compass and Torch*. 2003. Print.