

Owen marshall short stories essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



Owen Marshall's short stories have many qualities which make them entertaining and, interesting to read. The strengths in his writing include the use of familiar New Zealand childhood settings, his evocation of the painful transition from childhood to adolescence, a theme of many of his stories, and also his use of potent symbols which resonate through the stories.

The stories I studied were all set in the small-town New Zealand landscape of the 1950s. Marshall manages to bring back the innocence of that pre-television time, when children played outside for their entertainment and the house was a place occupied mainly by the adults. In the story, "The Master of Big Jingles", the action is set only in the 'waxy profusion' of the fennel which is "pressing in on the town" and the fennel hut which the boys have built. The boys play childish games like snail races in this hut and it is a place of escapism, adventure and friendship. In "The Ace of Diamonds Gang", the world of the children is the world of a small town of Boy Scouts, the library, parent imposed curfews and the all important children's gang. The narrator says, in an authorial aside, "So the Ace of Diamonds gang seems my full boyhood". It is clear that the gang members, although they see themselves as avengers and adventurers and fancy themselves as the sort of heroes they read about in their comics and Boys' Own adventure books, are an innocent and harmless group of boys.

In his stories Marshall skilfully examines the experiences of growing up, the often painful and confusing process involved in moving from childhood into adolescence. "The Master of Big Jingles" tells a story of the loss of friendship and the problems of growing up. The main character is Creamy Myers, a boy

who, according to his best friend the narrator, “ had a look that hinted at the appreciation of more colours than existed in the spectrums of the rest of us”. The narrator and Creamy share the fennel hut exclusively and play their games of adventure together. So when Creamy’s father insists that Creamy go to a different secondary school from the narrator, and the friendship starts to go astray, it is a painful lesson for the narrator. He learns that growing up is not always easy and that adults can make decisions that can dramatically affect their children’s lives. He also learns the reality of class distinction - “ Creamy was Tech and the rest of us were High” - and the sense of loss that comes with the dissolution of old childhood loyalties. (I’ve forgotten the quote here and I don’t have the stories with me. It’s the last sentence in the story.)

In “ Me Ace of Diamonds Gang” the reality of puberty is already threatening the childhood fantasy of the gang. The boys are at different stages of growing up and Dusty is showing an interest in girls that the narrator and the others do not share. The narrator tells of the last escapade of the gang, in which they raid Jorgesson’s yard. They catch Jorgesson having sex with his girlfriend and get caught out when the narrator leaves his library card pinned to the door instead of what he believes is the Ace of Diamonds card.

The gang splits apart after the “ unhesitating betrayal” of his fellow conspirators. “ It was the end of free imagination, and of boyhood perhaps.”

In “ Supper Waltz Wilson” the narrator learns of the painful reality of family problems and insanity, within the family of Supper Waltz Wilson. Mr Wilson, who spends much of the time in the lavatory singing hymns, eventually

becomes totally insane and is taken away to an institution. Supper Waltz, a confident but sensitive boy (quote here about SW W), is so overwhelmed by the events that he runs away to sea. The narrator is a much more innocent and unworldly boy than Supper Waltz and learns second hand the heavy burdens carried by others.

Marshall uses powerful and evocative symbols to lend resonance to his stories. The fennel in "The Master of Big Tingles" represents all the good things about childhood huts - adventure, escapism and the closeness of friendship - but when the friendship begins to break down it represents also the fragility of that friendship. The fennel is trampled and broken just like the friendship is broken. The snails also act as a symbol of that fragile boyhood friendship, smashed to a pulp by one of Creamy's friends from Tech. The symbols within "Supper Waltz Wilson" are significant to our understanding of the story. The oysters that Supper Waltz is eating at the beginning of the story represent Supper Waltz himself, hard and crusty on the outside but soft and easily affected on the inside.

There is also, of course, the idea of the pearl inside the oyster implicit in the symbol. The cast sheep which Supper Waltz cries about symbolises Mr Wilson, a harmless 'lamb of God' who is unable to shake off his madness and metaphorically stand up straight again. On the same theme of madness the morepork, one of the voices Mr Wilson hears and the sound which can haunt Supper Waltz for hours, represents the darkness which has overtaken Mr Wilson, the insanity from which he cannot escape. Supper Waltz's

sensitivity to life means that this darkness is an ever present threat to him also.

Owen Marshall has written stories that illustrate the tensions and problems of growing up. The careful detailing of the setting, the intensity of the symbols and the universality of the themes make them fine stories to read.