

Setting and characterization in "greasy lake" by t.coraghessan essay sample

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The path to becoming an adult is lined with a variety of childhood and adolescent experiences, some more painful than others. In T. Coraghessen Boyle's short story, " Greasy Lake," Boyle masterfully uses the setting and the protagonist's experience to teach us an old but vital lesson: those who choose not to learn and grow from their past mistakes are destined to repeat them, and thus will never mature and realize their true potential.

In the beginning, the main character (also the narrator) depicts his adolescence as " a time when courtesy [...] went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste" (129). The three thought of themselves as dangerous characters, and would try to consume anything they could get their hands on, from glue and ether, to " what somebody claimed was cocaine" (129). However, it seems unclear to the main character and his two friends that they are not actually bad characters, in reality. Really bad characters do not drive their " parents' whining station wagons" (129) or read intellectual French novels by Andre Gide. Boyle instills a general thought that these three boys are just your ordinary, everyday, misguided juvenile delinquents with an unclear view of what it really means to be a man.

Thereafter, the boys drive up to the main setting of Greasy Lake, and provoke who is described as a " very bad character" (130). The subsequent events that took place led the boys to a realization that each of them was nothing more than just three kids on an adventure for the night; little did

they know what lay in store for them. An exciting brawl ensues, and Boyle expresses the thrill of the resulting fight splendidly. The narrator is shocked after the first kick from the bad character's "steel-toed boot" which "caught [him] under the chin, chipped my

favorite tooth, and left me sprawled in the dirt" (131). After Digby and Jeff joined in the brawl and were unsuccessful in bringing down the greasy character, the narrator does something rash, and what might have been a irreversible mistake, as he grabs the tire iron from under the seat of his car and attacks the greasy character with it, leaving him for dead. Soon after, the story then shifts to the girl who was with the greasy character, who was unconscious. The three boys are filled with adrenaline in their "lust and greed and purest primal badness" (132). Then, they move in on the girl, "panting, wheezing, tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh" (132). Also, the fact that they are in a powder keg that they are not at all prepared for is set off on as a third car rolls onto the scene, and the narrator thinks "[...] nothing" (132). He states, "I thought escape [...] I was gone" (132).

Now, the main character is petrified, yet still not completely convinced that he is not a bad character, possibly because he has managed to survive thus far. Still running from his consequences, he hurries into the lake, "ankle-deep in muck and tepid water" (132). The lake represents his safe haven, until he suddenly stumbles upon "the waterlogged carcass of a second [character]" (133). Even more horrifying now, the narrator comes face-to-face with the reality of death, and so this abruptly ends his previous attitude of pride and arrogance. The main character "stumbled back in horror" and

his mind “ yanked in six different directions” (133). The deceased biker did not learn from the mistakes of his younger years in the past, and paid the ultimate price at the end for failing to do so.

Extremely rattled, the protagonist tries to get away and finally realizes the seriousness of the situation, as though the dead biker was somehow showing the main character some kind of subtle knowledge or lesson that the biker had died for, and one that the main character should take to heart. Boyle implies that this is a sort of baptism for our narrator, the death of a young delinquent that he once was, and the birth of the decent man he would become. The two others, Digby and Jeff, experienced similar, though probably much less intense, epiphanies of their own, as they reveal themselves from their hiding spots at dawn, “ looking sheepish” as they “ gape[d] at the ravaged automobile” in which they had arrived at the lake, symbolic of their own ravaged egos and youthful pride (135).

In “ Greasy Lake,” Boyle unquestionably shows us that maturing into adults is reliant upon what we experience in the past, and is also dependent on putting into action the lessons that we learn. This principle is as relevant today as it has ever been. Experience can be enjoyable, unpleasant, or absolutely awful; and, experience can be a hard teacher. Nevertheless, through all the lessons we learn in life, we gradually mature, becoming more prudent with every lesson learned. On the other hand, if we neglect to learn from our mistakes, we may be not only truly “ bad characters,” but people of bad character. This was obviously true of Al, the dead biker, whose cause of death was due to the flawed nature of his lifestyle; but this is not so for the

narrator and his two friends, who, when they are now presented with an opportunity “ to party [...] to do some of these with me and Sarah,” reluctantly reply, “[s]ome other time,” (136) no longer desiring to prove themselves bad characters, but just wanting to go home.

Work Cited

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