

All of childhood is essentially preparation for adulthood

[Life](#), [Childhood](#)



It is said that all of childhood is essentially preparation for adulthood. Children, during the precious few years they spend without the responsibility, awareness and experience to be considered adults, watch and mimic the world around them, for it is by mimicking that they learn to become adults themselves. Both “Werewolves in Their Youth”, by Michael Chabon and “The Man in the Well”, by Ira Sher, promote the supposition that all of childhood is preparation for adulthood, by revealing characteristics and attitudes in young children that show glimpses of the world and environment in which they were raised and by which they were shaped.

Both stories, additionally, give insight as to what it is that separates adults from children, both by contrasting adult and child characters and by leading the reader to a directed realization of what characteristics of behavior define adulthood. In “The Man in the Well”, Sher begins by having the nine year old child, whose name is the only one among all of the children that we never learn, state that although he remembered that the children had made the decision not to help the man stuck in the well, he didn’t remember if they’d given themselves a reason for not helping.

(Sher, 1) The act of making a decision without giving a reason is both very childlike and very adult-like. Children, without the ability to make critical decision and employ as rational thought as adults, often make decisions without reasons, functioning mainly on impulse. Will I swing on the swings or ride the slide? Slide it is – but why? But failing to give a reason for a decision can also be a very adult-like quality. After all, hasn’t everyone heard their mother voice the statement “I don’t need a reason, I’m your mother”?

Adults and especially parents will often make a decision without giving a reason to enforce that they are beyond needing to give a reason and should not be questioned by virtue of their status as adults. So while the children's decision not to help the man in the well was not supported by a reason, and while that may have only been a sign of childhood impetuosity, it can also be a sign of imitating the adults that have provided the examples to follow in their lives.

The next sign in "The Man in the Well" the childhood is essentially preparation for adulthood is in the children's unwillingness to give their names to the man in the well, exhibited by the careful way in which they talk and the embarrassment felt when one child's name is accidentally revealed. (Sher, 3) This, like making decisions without giving reasons, can also be seen as both an adultlike and a childlike trait, bridging the behaviors of one generation to the next. Remaining nameless is a way to hide, and in a situation where the children are already a bit fearful and unsure of their own actions, hiding is natural instinct.

Indeed, when the boy whose name has been revealed decides to reveal the names of all of his friends who have also ignored the plight of the man in the well, the protagonist compares the faces of the children clustered around the well as their names are announced to the faces of "spectators in the freak tent when the circus" comes to town. (Sher 5) This comparison shows an awareness of behavior that is startling adult in nature. As Aaron brings everyone out of hiding by announcing names, they begin to see themselves

as if watching a carny at the fair. Without the cloak of anonymity to hide behind, awareness is built.

This is a very adult-like reaction, in that roles are often carried out anonymously in the adult world, to protect at times and to cloak in others. How many accused criminals know the names of the jurors in whose hands their fate is held? How many American citizens know the names of the cabinet members and advisors that the president uses to make decisions that will impact both the country and the world? There is safety in anonymity. Similarly, in “Werewolves in Their Youth”, the children, Timothy and Paul, find safety in creating roles and identities for themselves beyond those by which their parents, teachers and friends know them.

Both children have suffered difficulties at home and at school. Timothy seems to have lost a father to Vietnam and Paul’s own father seems to be on his way out of his life, the result of an imminent divorce. (Chabon 2, 4) Both mothers are depicted as frazzled women trying to do their best. And both Timothy and Paul have attended the same doctor, implied to be a psychiatrist, perhaps as a result of their home lives or perhaps a result of the teasing they face in school and the perception that they are each other’s only friend.

(Chabon, 8) Therefore, it is in the roles that they create for themselves, similar to the anonymity in “The Man in the Well”, that they find safety. This, at first, can seem to be a very childlike reaction – two children entering into a land of make believe in order to shelter themselves from the outside world. However, it is a very psychologically profound reaction that shows their

tendencies toward adulthood. We see in Paul's behavior his imitation of his mother, even in his role as "Ant-Man". His mom, apparently a realtor, is his basis for the behavior he exhibits when showing ants around in the village he has created for them.

(Chabon, 1) He perceives his mother's role as a realtor as a powerful one, apparently, because in transforming into his role as Ant-Man, he exhibits power over the ants. One of the clearest examples of childhood as preparation for adulthood occurs towards the end of "Werewolves in Their Youth". Paul has been extremely reluctant to be lumped in with Timothy and exhibits defiant behavior when they are in the office together, turning his back on what he has already acknowledged is his only friend. Mrs.

Gladfelter, the children's teacher, has tried valiantly to convince Paul to help Timothy come out of the character he has assumed and used to terrorize girls on the playground: that of a werewolf. Paul, caught in the trap of childhood, tries to convince himself that he sees signs that Timothy is actually a werewolf, seeing a "werewolf glint" (Chabon, 7) in his eyes and the "thin, dark down of wolfish hair" upon his cheek (Chabon, 9). He struggles to make adult sense of this, however, and is torn by his desire to distance himself from this friend and the desire to help.

He finally makes his decision: he will help. Donning the persona of the professor that Timothy has repeatedly referred to him as, he plays into Timothy's fantasy that he's not yet found an antidote for his werewolfism. As he's being lead out of the office and back to class, he stops, turns around and with his imaginary gun, takes careful aim at Timothy, telling him that

he's going to shoot him with a dart filled with antidote and tranquilizer. He then pretends to shoot at Timothy, and Timothy, well within this fantasy world himself, proclaims himself cured.

(Chabon, 10) To the bystander, it might appear that these are simply two kids playing a game, but Paul has the adult awareness to see that his teacher is looking at him approvingly for his actions. This is not different from how many parents cope with the ills their children suffer – engaging in fantasy to heal wounds and distract from pain. Both Chabon and Sher clearly show in the characters they have created that the actions and reactions children work through during childhood is an imitation of the adult world in which they live.

Because of that imitation, the children are forming their future selves for the adults that they will someday become – preparing for adulthood starts young. By looking at the short stories by these authors, traits are shown that differentiate children from adults. The key trait, beyond age and experience, that separates adults from children is awareness. In the Chabon story, Paul becomes aware at the end that he must take actions to help his friend Timothy, and that without those actions, Timothy might not be able to battle his own demons and get back to acting in a normal fashion.

This awareness is a giant leap for Paul towards the responsible adult that he will become. In the Sher story, we leave off with the adult feeling of guilt – the nameless protagonist leaves the well for the final time and vows never to return. (Sher, 6) The child has become aware that his actions have been shameful – he and his friends have left a man in the well to die, instead of

obtaining help that is so readily available. He is also aware that all of the children feel equally guilty, as upon their last trip from the well, they could not look into each other's lives. This character has also taken a giant leap towards adulthood.

Many children mess up while young and commit deeds for which they later feel sorry, but few contribute to a man's pain and suffering and assumed death in such a way that it will haunt the rest of their lives. This situation will either impact the child to lead a respectable life later on, to make up for his actions, or will go on to commit later actions in a similar vain, having rationalized his childhood experience. Either way, he has begun his preparation for adulthood. References Chabon, Michael. "Werewolves in Their Youth". Random House: 1999. pp. 1-10. Sher, Ira. "The Man in the Well." Chicago R