

The rich brother



“ The Rich Brother” Personal wealth and a responsible life would seem at first to fall on the positive side of things when judging an individual. This holds true in Tobias Wolff's, “ The Rich Brother. ” Still, Wolff wants us to delve further and look past the obvious into the relationship of Donald and Pete, two brothers that in many ways are dependent on one another. “ The Rich Brother” is a Cain and Able story of sibling rivalry that uses contrasting characters to question the meaning of success.

Pete is introduced as a hard working man that has earned a certain level of success. Pete is confident and we sense he has a feeling of entitlement when Wolff includes that “ Pete made a lot of money, but not more than he thought he deserved. ” Pete clearly has a sense of responsibility in his work and his family. He has a wife, a home, and children, all of which he is responsible for and apparently provides for. With his possessions, this early narration leads the reader to believe and label Pete as the rich brother.

Donald is introduced to us in a whole different light. Donald, the younger brother, was still single. ” This first sentence clearly labels Donald as a lesser man than his brother right at the start merely because of his marital status. It is clear that Donald is without more than just a wife or family. He has no material possessions, no money, no career. Of course Donald is fine with this. He is kind and caring, more spiritual and doesn't place wealth and possessions high in importance. The author strengthens his case for Pete immediately by pitting the brothers at the opposite sides of a scale in wealth , success and responsibility.

He doesn't stop there also places the brothers at opposite sides of the spectrum in personality with Pete clearly portrayed as strong and confident

and Donald weak and aloof. Pete holds the power in this relationship. He supports Donald early on giving him a hundred dollars to hold on to after Donald loses his place to live. He speaks down to Donald saying that " You won't pay me back. You can't. You don't know how. " Pete is the big brother, Donald the younger brother and Pete uses the fact that he is the elder of the two to literally speak down to Donald.

Pete often talks to Donald as if Donald was a child. They have an exchange when discussing whether Donald should continue to live at the farm. Pete clearly spells out what he believes Donald should do and ignores Donald when he says that he has things under control. As the story continues we feel that there must be underlying circumstances beyond what we see on the surface. There is a meanness attached to the actions and words of Pete toward his brother. Something more than a responsible person chastising and taking control of an irresponsible one.

It seems that Pete not only holds on to what makes him so different than his brother, he waves these differences in Donald's face. The question becomes, is he doing to show Donald that there is a better way, or does he himself need to do this for himself. Is Pete somehow longing for this power and control to make a case to himself that he in fact is the better man. " Mom was in a state every time you burped. " Pete tells Donald. We find that Pete's way towards his brother may not be merely what is evident on the surface.

There could very well be deep rooted emotions stemming from their youth with Pete being jealous of the attention that Donald received from their mother. And then there is the dream. Though not based on reality the dream

places Pete in a situation where he is dependent upon Donald. In Pete's dream he is blind and Donald must take care of him. This dream is troublesome to Pete, yet maybe a kind of revelation. Is Pete just simply taking care of Donald or does Pete need to take care of Donald, not just for Donald but Pete's sake too.

When Pete admits in a cynically yet joyous tone, " I've got you on my hands for good. ", Pete in fact maybe sees a bit of the light. He turns around to go back and retrieve Donald and realizes that he is responsible and just maybe he needs Donald just as Donald needs him. So which is the rich brother? Pete with all of his worldly possessions, or Donald who is trusting and free of responsibility. It was a nice attempt by the author, personally I will stick with Pete. Donald surely needs Pete. Pete only needs Donald somewhere in the back of his mind where his dreams are born.