

Free thread by stuart dybek essay example

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Essay/Literary Analysis

Introduction

“ Thread” is a short story written by Stuart Dybek (“ Dybek”) and published in Harper’s Magazine in 1998.

Literary Analysis

“ Thread” tells the story of a fourth-grade boy who has just joined the Knights of Christ one year after taking his First Communion. It is a strict examination of the Catholic Church by Dybek as seen through the eyes of a small child.

The child is clearly Dybek as it reflects many of the influences found in his life growing up in a dreary and poor working-class neighborhood in Chicago. He speaks about the boys acting as Knights having grown out of their Holy Communion suits the year before (clearly new ones couldn’t be afforded). He then writes about how Sister Mary Barbara had sewn all of their sashes themselves—another reference to the poverty involved in their existence. Finally, the grandmother relating her own views about the way the church used to be—less about money and more about faith—or the fear of God protecting the poor.

Raised as a Catholic, Dybek’s images and impressions of nuns, priests, saints, and the faithful all come into play in the story. So ingrained was the faith of this young child that he could recite nearly every passage from the bible and tell of all of the powers bestowed upon the saints in order to protect the faithful. Down he went in the order one by one, beginning with Saint Barbara who was locked in a closet and eventually killed by her father for refusing to renounce her faith. He points out that none of the children

asked how she was killed, which is another good indicator of fear.

The boy continues with his glorification of the saints and his knowledge about them over the other boys who were not true believers in his opinion. Understanding that he would be entering the priesthood, he took his faith more seriously. Perhaps much in the way that the Grandmother in the story leaned on the methods of the “ old” church, the child leaned upon his faith and his knowledge in it as the one thing that would protect him from a life outside of the church.

As the child awaits communion, his mind wanders to images of what he has seen in the church. It seems to be his first instinct as to how false the world of the church really is. He is bent on the hysterics of the faithful and seems to be somewhat resentful of the hierarchy involved with finally achieving priesthood. He acknowledges the process, but seems to be somewhat resentful of the wait required to attain his goal.

It is also during this time that he acknowledges the slightly tattered sash that Sister Mary Barbara has sewn. The removal of the loose thread is symbolic of the unravelling of the illusions that the child holds towards his own faith. The tying of the string to his finger until the circulation was nearly lost is clearly a reference to the self-flagellation that awaits him once he reaches puberty and once he is ordained into the priesthood.

Curiosity leads the boy to play with the thread. He places it in one hand and then the other and then finally places it in his mouth. The taste of the thread is interesting gold and musty. He thought it would taste metallic, but it did not. Could this be a reference to the superficiality of the church? All of those things that are supposed to hold high truths and be very rich are just

common methods of controlling insecure and terrified people? Maybe. More troubling than that thought is the impact that swallowing the thread has on the child. His belief that he would be damned to eternal hell for taking communion after eating a thread—or worse, breaking the Eighth Commandment for pretending to be sick so that he wouldn't have to face the priest are simply unsettling. How much was the church asking of him—or was he asking too much of himself in applying such a strict ethic to his own young life?

In an interesting and stereotypical response of a Catholic who has sinned, the boy remembers a way to lie that will be forgivable—so long as it was not spoken. The anxiety level was extreme at the thought of not being able to take communion with the other Knights. The solution was to walk up to the altar with the other boys and place his hand over his chest and look down from the priest. By not opening his mouth and making this gesture, he quietly let the priest know that he was not “clean” enough to receive the body of Christ. As generally happens, the elimination of one problem creates another.

The solution worked well enough to get the boy through mass and the taking of the sacrament, but it disturbed him somewhere in the back of his mind very deeply. The fact that the priest never asked him why he couldn't take communion did not seem to puzzle him (I don't think that he wanted to know the answer). The announcement that the incident led to his eventual loss of faith does not come as a surprise—even to the adult who tells the story from both his perspective and the boy's.

The symbolism of the thread travels through the story in a way that

represents a connecting of dots of sorts. All through the story the boy seems to be adding up clues and pictures about a subject that is larger than life to him. It is almost as if he is trying to distinguish between reality and faith - trying deeply to understand that what he was seeing - every single aspect was actually a lie and he was still holding on to the truth of his faith—like a thread.

Works Cited

Dybek, Stuart. "Thread" Harper's Magazine. New York: (1998). Electronic copy courtesy of Google Books: Date Accessed: December 8, 2014.

http://books.google.com/books?id=TT8FqGokPL4C&pg=PA25&lpg=PA25&dq=%22+Thread%22+by+Stuart+Dybek&source=bl&ots=qYRwhpP3ON&sig=pNLYmep2I3VfKadXiwZS4pNBOMs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=_hSGVLmWCIWoNuWCg_AN&ved=0CB4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22%20Thread%22%20by%20Stuart%20Dybek&f=false.