

The wind in the willows



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *The Wind in the Willows*, author Kenneth Grahame portrays each character as having a particular role within an anthropomorphized nuclear family. The two main characters, namely Mole and Toad, are child-like figures insofar as they both possess characteristics such as naivety, impulsiveness, selfishness, immaturity and self-indulgence. Both characters, however, will come to recognize their childish shortcomings only as they are led away from their respective homes and comfort zones into a foreign reality that demands their growth and maturity. The naivety and self-motivated impulses that originally drive Mole and Toad's behaviour in the beginning chapters of the text, will become less evident as the two characters become more self-aware through a series of unfortunate events. Mole's child-like nature is first revealed when he disregards his spring cleaning and opts for an above-ground excursion in the meadow. Not only does this act of impulsiveness speak to Mole's irresponsibility and his inability to follow through with important tasks, it also shows his indifference towards structure, discipline, and anything else that stands in his way of freedom and pleasure. As Mole is underground cleaning his home, Grahame writes that something up above was calling him imperiously" (p. 2). This imperious voice is the voice of spring-- a voice that, for Mole, is strong enough to persuade him away from work towards a more inviting outside world. Mole is at once given to his childlike impulses when he obeys the voice of spring and disregards his chores altogether. When Mole reaches the hedge on the far side of the meadow, there is an elderly rabbit standing at the gap waiting to collect a toll payment. Grahame writes that the rabbit " was bowled over in an instant by the impatient and contemptuous Mole, who trotted along the side of the hedge chaffing the other rabbits as they peeped hurriedly from their holes to

see what the row was about. 'Onion-sauce! Onion-sauce! Mole remarked jeeringly, and was gone before they could think of a thoroughly satisfactory reply'(3). Mole is so overwhelmed by the newness of the outside world that he reacts, as most children would, with a giddy impulsiveness and audacity. Mole continues to act like a child when he decides to seek out Badger in the Wild Wood against the instruction of the more experienced Rat (38). Knowing full well that Rat has advised him never to travel to the Wild Wood, Mole, like a disobedient child, ignores Ratty's instructions and ventures into foreign territory in the harsh of winter. Earlier in the novel, when Mole observes Ratty's boat near the river bank, his " heart went out to it at once, even though he did not yet fully understand its uses"(5). Like a child who has just found a new toy to play with, " Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh of contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions" (6). This speaks to Mole's naivety as he is unaware of the impending dangers of his actions. For example, when he decides to enter alone into the Wild Wood. Mole penetrates deep into the forest until he finds himself surrounded by Ferrets, Weasels, and " that thing Rat had vainly tried to shield him from-the Terror of the Wild Wood" (44). Faced with a fight-or-flight decision, Mole, like a child, is paralyzed by fear and elects to hide in a hollow tree until Rat arrives to his rescue. Further evidence to suggest Mole is child-like is seen when he and Rat stumble upon a door scraper in the Wild Wood. As both characters are walking through the dark wood, Mole trips and opens his leg on a sharp object in the snow. The different ways in which Rat and Mole react to this situation testify to their levels of maturity. Mole is so absorbed with the pain of the cut that he says, " never mind what done it" (50). Rat, however, looks deeper into the situation

and remarks, " it's a very clean cut... that was never done by a branch or a stump. Looks as if it was made by a sharp edge of something in metal" (50). After Rat attends to Mole's injury he begins to dig doggedly in an attempt to find the culprit. After Rat discovers both a door-scraper and a door-mat in the snow, he infers that they are near Badger's home. Mole, however, impatiently dismisses each item as " another piece of domestic litter"(52). Like a child, Mole's impatience and naivety frustrate his ability to properly judge the situation. Eventually, Badger's home is found and Mole is at once humbled and in awe of his partner's detective work. Grahame writes: " Mole fell backwards on the snow from sheer surprise and delight [and said] 'you're so clever, I believe you could find anything you liked'" (54). In the Wild Wood experience, therefore, Mole also receives from Rat a lesson in deductive reasoning-Mole learns how to move from the general to the more specific-a mark of any mature-minded individual. Through the whole experience of loneliness and pain in the Wild Wood, Mole is eventually brought to a level of humility that proves to be the necessary pivot point from which he turns toward maturity. Toad is another child-like figure in *The Wind in the Willows*. Due to his superfluous wealth, he is at times naive, selfish, pouty, reckless, self-inflated, and impetuous. Toad's most blatant display of child-like behavior is illustrated in Chapter Six when he is forced into solitary confinement by his friends so that he may ruminate on his recklessness. Collectively, Badger, Mole and Ratty decide to temper Toad by confining him to his room until " the poison has worked itself out of his system" (104). In this case, Grahame is referring to the poison of compulsion, which for Toad is a compulsion towards self-gratification. While in isolation, Grahame explains that Toad " would arrange bedroom chairs in rude resemblance of a

motor-car and would crouch on the foremost of them, bent forward and staring fixedly ahead, making uncouth and ghastly noises, till the climax was reached, when, turning a complete somersault, he would lie prostrate amidst the ruins of the chairs, apparently completely satisfied for the moment"

(104). Such behavior that attempts to recreate reality through a series of make-believe actions is characteristic of a spoilt child who is unaware of their own immaturity and delusions. Toad continues to act like a child during his escape from the Wide World. After he has gone through the ordeal of escaping prison, disguising himself as a washer woman, stealing and selling a barge-woman's horse, he recounts these events with conceit: " They pursue me with engines, and policemen, and revolvers; I snap my fingers at them, and vanish laughing into space. I am, unfortunately, thrown into a canal by a woman, fat of the body and very evil-minded. What of it? I swim ashore, I seize her horse, I ride off in triumph, and I sell the horse for a whole pocketful of money and an excellent breakfast... I am the Toad, the handsome, the popular, the successful, Toad!" (189) In reality, Toad has accomplished nothing. In fact, he has lost much more than he ever had because of his immaturity and reckless behavior. Toad nevertheless insists on puffing himself up and singing a conceited song, similar to something a naïve child would do after bullying others in the schoolyard. As the story progresses, however, Mole and Toad show signs of maturity as they become more self-aware and responsible. Initially, Mole is dependent on Rat and Badger for his survival and happiness. For example, it is Rat who takes Mole boating, packs him lunches, offers him shelter and tells him stories, much like a mother or father figure would do with their young child. Similarly, when Mole is overcome by homesickness, it is Rat who sacrifices his time and

energy to ensure that Mole is given both physical and emotional direction. In due time, however, Mole learns to be more assertive and responsible. For example, when young Portly is lost in nature, it is Mole who does not hesitate to come to his rescue and quickly comforts the little animal (127). In effect, Mole shows great courage here, and he has a strong sense of responsibility that he did not previously possess. Also, when the Sea Rat mesmerizes Ratty with his stories, convincing him to relinquish his home on the river bank for a more luxurious and liberating life on the sea (170), it is Mole who is the voice of reason and compassion. Mole successfully nurses Ratty back to his senses by reminding Rat of all that is good for him at home, and all that he has to be thankful for in the present. What's more, Mole offers Rat sheets of paper so that he can write poetry and ultimately reconnect with his inner self. The way in which Mole cares for Rat during this episode speaks to his maturity and his newly acquired responsiveness and compassion. The most fitting example of Mole's maturity, however, is seen at the end of the story when the Stotes, Farrets, and Weasles invade Toad Hall. Without any prompting, Mole disguises himself as a washer woman, walks to Toad Hall, and spreads false information that enables the river bankers to reclaim the estate. With the help of Rat and Badger acting as parental figures, Mole is slowly able to break away from his literal and figurative hole in the ground, and take responsibility for his actions in the outside world. In the same way, Toad makes tracks towards maturity only when he ceases all self-admiration, humbles himself and admits to his own selfishness and shortcomings. Throughout the novel, Toad has fleeting moments of self-knowledge only when he feels threatened to the point of no escape. For example, when Toad crashes a stolen motorcar for the umpteenth time, and then finds himself in

hot-pursuit by the police, he gasps, "'Oh my ... what an ass I am! What a conceited and headless ass!... if I ever steal a motor-car again! If ever I sing another conceited song'"(196). In this context, it's almost like Toad is living in a childish religious dreamworld; he believes that confessing his sins in moments of pain or trouble will somehow save him from having to face the consequences of his actions. Toad's confessions, therefore, are motivated by fear and not by a true sense of wrongdoing at this early point in the story. Grahame reinforces the idea of Toad's dreamlike reality when he describes Toad's behavior after stealing the motor-car in Chapter Ten: " as if in a dream, he found himself, somehow, seated in the driver's seat; as if in a dream, he pulled the lever and swung the car around the yard and out through the archway; and, as if in a dream, all sense of right and wrong, all fear of obvious consequences, seemed temporarily suspended" (111). Clearly, Toad spends a good portion of the novel living in a childish dreamworld where he is the ultimate and final judge between right and wrong. As the story progresses, however, Toad's maturity becomes more self evident and authentic as he becomes less solipsistic. In the final chapter, Toad is beseeched by his friends to sing a song at the banquet for his part in helping defeat the Stoates and Weasles who had appropriated his property. Toad is thus placed in a situation where people see him as the victim and hero; however, at the same time he recognizes all the pain that he has caused for many people, including his friends- for this he feels a strong sense of guilt. Ultimately, he sees the request at the banquet as a massive act of kindness and forgiveness, to which he is obliged to respond by simply " shaking his head gently, raising one paw in mild protest, and... managing to convey to them that this dinner was being run on strictly conventional lines"

(241). Grahame also writes of Toad, " after due consultation with his friends, he selected a handsome gold chain and locket set with pearls, which he dispatched to the gaoler's daughter with a letter that even badger admitted to be modest, grateful, and appreciative; and the engine driver, in his turn, was properly thaned and compensated for all his pains and trouble" (241). These gestures of compensation speak to Toads newly developed maturity insofar as he is now able to reach outside himself and treat others the way he expects to be treated. Clearly, Mole and Toad mature from child-like characters to more self-aware and responsible individuals throughout the *The Wind in the Willows*. Through pain and suffering Mole and Toad learn responsibility and accountability. Mole learns to respect Rat and Badger and reward each for his wisdom and discipline, while Toad learns humility and then experiences forgiveness. In fact, all the animals in the *Wind in the Willows* become less child-like only as they learn to listen to one another and share in the gift of friendship.