

How does Frayn
present young
Stephen in the first
three chapters of
"Spies"? essay...



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In the opening chapters of “Spies”, I believe that Frayn wished to present the young Stephen so that he would, as a character, evoke various different feelings and opinions from his readers. As a result, there appear to be a range of different emotions that a reader could have towards Stephen; from pitying him to finding him somewhat annoying, endearing or a mixture of several all at once. Personally, I am led to finding Stephen quite annoying in the opening chapters – I feel Frayn has tried to ensure that we feel at least frustrated with him in the early part of the book. I believe that how a reader was to respond to Stephen as a character would depend largely on their own personality, as I feel that how he is viewed is very dependant on the response to individual traits. Frayn appears to use many different techniques in order to ensure that he is able to manipulate the reader’s feelings towards Stephen, a main one of these being the use of the character of Keith throughout the book. There are many aspects involving Keith that Frayn uses to present Stephen to the reader – how Stephen is towards Keith, what he thinks of him, the dialogue between them, as well as the overall comparison between the two.

I believe that this is a main technique because it is brought into the book almost immediately after we are introduced to young Stephen, and I believe this shows that Frayn wishes to use Keith to help create our overall opinion of Stephen – he doesn’t leave any time for the reader to form an opinion without him. At the beginning of the first chapter, we are told how Stephen viewed his relationship with Keith when the older Stephen explains: “I was acutely aware, even then, of my incomprehensible good fortune in being Keith’s friend”. This line immediately shows to the reader how Stephen

idolises Keith, and is a good line to use that sums up how Stephen would have treated the relationship. He appears to treat the relationship as if it is a great privilege to be Keith's friend, and this admission of inferiority could either irritate the reader, or perhaps provoke pity toward him. This is because it presents Stephen as a character who has very little confidence in himself and therefore respects anyone, without having any real reason to do so, which could be seen as something to pity him for.

The way Stephen is around Keith also makes him constantly sound as if he feels very humble in his presence, which again presents him as a slightly weak person due to his lack of confidence in himself. An example of this is when the narration says " Thank you for having me. Thank you. Thank you.

" I believe that this quote really shows Stephen's usual mindset, seeming to the reader as if he is always grateful; grateful for being allowed to be Keith's friends, for being allowed to be in his house, for being allowed to talk to him. As a result, due to Stephen constantly believing himself to be inferior, the reader starts to believe him inferior also, and could begin to look down on him ourselves. Although this could mean that we begin to pity Stephen, I believe that this more ensure that we feel frustrated with Stephen for this attitude and the lack of seemingly having no real courage to stand up for himself. I think that Stephen's worship of Keith would be less infuriating for the reader if we actually knew anything about Keith himself as a person. Whenever Stephen talks about him, it is generally something he said, or something he owns, or something he does.

Throughout the book we learn very little about Keith as a person, especially from Stephen, and I believe that Frayn engineered this intentionally to show the reader that the relationship is really quite false and not really based on anything. There is a long description of Keith's house in the opening chapters, and Stephen appears to focus on the very small details – he notices the pattern on the plates and “ the diamond-shaped window of spun glass “ that is cut into the front door. Although this shows clearly to the reader just how many times Stephen has been into Keith's house, I believe that it also shows just how in awe Stephen is of everything he owns and the finer things in his house. Stephen seems to value Keith as a friend not because of his personality but because of how wealthy and exclusive he seems – and that makes his attitude towards Keith all the more unsatisfactory to the reader because we find it even more astonishing that Stephen has not seen through him as we perhaps already have. Stephen's belief that he is inferior to Keith in all ways is shown often in the early part of the book, and this further cements the reader's opinion that Stephen seems to be a rather pathetic character.

He seems to invite pity; the way that he offers very little of his own opinion throughout the book means that sometimes the reader may feel that we don't really know Stephen as a person. He never queries Keith, or anything he says, and his words appear to be seen as law by Stephen. We can effectively see this in Chapter 2, when Stephen says to his father, “ It's true, Keith said”. I believe that this quote shows how Stephen needs no proof when something is said by Keith, and this reasoning here sounds incredibly definitive. This use of a character like Keith is an effective technique that

Frayn uses; because as well as giving us a strong comparison; it also gives a base character for the changes in Stephen to be shown throughout the book, as Keith is a constant character.

In being so trustworthy of what Keith says, it also shows that Stephen is very naïf^{1/2}, because he rarely questions anything and just accepts it as true.

Presenting him as naïf^{1/2} means that this could cause two opinions of Stephen; we could either find this trait annoying, or find the fact that he is so trustworthy endearing and typical of a child. Frayn also uses description to present Stephen, he describes his appearance to us early on in the book, so that we can picture him easily throughout. We are told that he has “ a too-short” grey shirt and “ too long” grey shorts, that he wears “ grubby” tennis shoes, one of his socks has slipped down, and his laces are undone, immediately presenting him as a rather pitiful sight.

Throughout this passage in the book, Frayn slips in words that are perhaps supposed to represent Stephen overall – words such as “ inadequate”, “ plain”, “ hopeless”, and “ failed”. Whilst one of these words might perhaps have served well in the description, using several of them in a short space subconsciously gives the reader an impression of perhaps how they should be viewing Stephen, or perhaps how everyone else views him. As if this was not effective enough alone, Frayn then presents the reader with a standard by which to compare him; a description of Keith. Frayn cleverly uses the same aspects of Keith’s appearance to describe as he did Stephen’s, showing the reader that it is an intentional comparison that we should take notice of. Here, we are told that Keith is wearing the same clothes, and that there is where the similarities end.

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Frayn proceeds to tell us that Keith is smartly and correctly dressed, with his grey socks “neatly pulled up” and his sandals “neatly buckled”. Using physical description as a comparison between the boys is an effective technique because it means the reader is able to visually compare them and means that the comparison can be all the more vivid. I believe Frayn used this technique to make the reader perhaps pity Stephen, as it seems as if he never really had a chance of being Keith’s equal just because of his nature. It also makes Stephen seem much more like a typical little boy, which means the reader is able to think of him more as a normal person and somewhat more down to earth, presenting him favourably to the reader. The way that everything Stephen is wearing is incorrect also creates a slightly comical image, because everything is so exaggerated and generates an image of Stephen that could be pathetic.

I think this is because it almost seems as if we are superior to him here as he seems so untidy, and this generates the comical picture in our minds as it is so easy to imagine. As well as the use of Keith as a technique to present Stephen, Frayn also uses his family in a direct comparison with Stephen’s. This is effective because it allows the reader to see how Stephen really thinks and how he judges people, an important aspect in constructing an opinion of how we feel about him. Despite seeming to feel inferior throughout the book, when describing his family I feel that Stephen comes across as somewhat condescending – much of the description of his father implies that Stephen feels he is not good enough. We are told that his job is “too dull to describe”, and that his general appearance is “disorganised” and “unsatisfactory”.

Every aspect of his father that Stephen describes has a negative adjective preceding it – which makes him seem rather harsh on his father and determined to find something wrong with him. Added to this, the aspects that Stephen dislikes about his father seem to only be unsatisfactory in comparison to Keith's father. A sentence in the description that particularly stands out in this way is “ And even when he was at home he didn't whistle that terrifying whistle, he didn't call Stephen “ old bean” and threaten to cane him”. This line is particularly effective because Frayn has phrased it in such a way that the reader is instantly able to see where Stephen is drawing his criteria for a good father from.

We do not understand why Stephen would want to have a father who does things like this, but then are able to realise that Frayn wishes us to see further just how much Stephen idolises Keith – he would happily have a frightening father if it meant he was more like Keith. This seems astonishing to us, as even with the negative adjectives used Stephen's father does not seem to be so unappealing. Another main technique that Frayn uses to present Stephen to the reader is the way the book is narrated, and the style that he uses to do this. He tells the story in a way that shows us what Stephen believes and then shows us that this is incorrect, making the reader feel somewhat superior to him. An example of this can be seen in chapter 1, when Stephen is explaining about methods of travelling to school.

He says “ Green's the right colour for a bicycle, just as it's the wrong one for a belt or a bus”. Although this quote clearly shows what the younger Stephen thought, the way it is written makes it sound as if the elder Stephen is being sarcastic when he saying it. I think this is because it is said with such

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certainty, without any doubt in the phrase whatsoever, and this makes it almost seem as if elder Stephen is mimicking how his younger self used to behave and how he was very accepting of anything that Keith said. As a result of this, I believe that a reader would take Stephen's opinions from his childhood less seriously, as we see that even he realises that what he thought then was wrong, or at least exaggerated.

In a way, I believe that makes the reader think more favourably of younger Stephen, because it reminds us that he is still just a child and is therefore allowed to be rather clueless, and I believe that could be why Frayn chose to use this technique. However, it could also serve to fuel the negative opinion, because it emphasises further just how accepting he is of the fact that apparently Keith is so much better than him. The narration as a whole is quite an effective method of presenting the younger Stephen, because as it is written in third person it means that we can see all of what Stephen is thinking. This is good because it the reader can then get a balanced view of him to create our own opinions, and see his thought processes to see how he reaches the conclusions he does.

I believe this helps us to understand Stephen better, and so a reader perhaps might not judge him quite so harshly. It also enables us to recognise that he is still a child, as some of his thoughts are very childish. For example, when talking about the possibility of Mrs Elmsley being a German spy, he says "It had never occurred to me why she had a moustache and a wart in the middle of her forehead". This cartoon-like view that all villains and bad people must be ugly, and that a wart automatically makes you a bad person, is very stereotypical and reminds us that Stephen is still a child. It also <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-frayn-present-young-stephen-in-the-first-three-chapters-of-spies-essay/>

makes him seem very comical as we are able to laugh at him for these sorts of statements, which present him as a much more favourable person and character, which I believe is what Frayn wished to achieve by having the narration written in this way.

Overall, I believe the techniques that Frayn use to present Stephen to the reader are effective in creating a strong opinion of him from the opening chapter, and are especially effective in creating a character that could be seen differently by every individual reader, enabling them to have a strong personal opinion. I do not believe that there would be one shared opinion because the character traits that Frayn shows Stephen to have would cause different responses from different personalities, because almost every aspect of his character I have included in this essay could be responded to in a number of different ways. I believe that Frayn wishes our opinion of Stephen to change throughout the book, and that these chapters are important for creating the initial opinion of him.