

The black swan: portrayal of the cost of fame

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“ In three words I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life: it goes on.” (Robert Frost). Life changes continuously with each choice and decision creating an eternal cycle even after death. Childhood is a time of innocence while adulthood is a time of maturity. If one were to combine both these stages, you would end up with adolescence; the transitional stage of life. This transition carries both a time of wonder and curiosity, but it can also bring terror and tribulation. David Mitchell not only does he define adolescence; he delivers it masterfully in his literary novel *Black Swan Green*. Mitchell achieves this by creating a tale that takes place in Cold War England in 1982, told through the eyes of Jason, a thirteen year-old who’s slowly grasping the concept of adulthood and defining it through his quirky, innocent voice in the constantly changing village of Worcestershire in a course of a year.

Innocence: a word that children embody. Throughout *Black Swan Green*, Jason is confronted by adult situations. These situations arrange from smoking, sex, and love; elements that the adolescence stage is compose of. Jason does not know how process and handle these situations as exposed in his speech. For example, Hugo, Jason’s fifteen year-old cousin, teaches him how to smoke his first cigarette. Jason describes the smoke as “ gassy dirt” (Mitchell 65) not wanting to continue. At the same time, Hugo relates smoking to sexual experiences by using explicit words like “ shameful virginity” (Mitchell 64) and “ sex without an orgasm” (Mitchell 65). Jason pretends to understand his older cousin, but he personally does not understand him by thinking, “(I don’t know what an orgasm is...)” (Mitchell 65). By going into depth, the reader can piece together that Jason is still a

child through his innocence. Jason's honesty and childish word choice further enhances Jason's innocence because he clearly does not know how to handle this situation yet. If one were to combine the pieces together, Jason is simply going through a process of adolescence and slowly learning what it means to be an adult. Yet, at the same time, his innocence will hamper his growth during different situations throughout the novel. For example, later on in the book, Jason witnesses sexual intercourse involving a teenage couple. Jason sugar-coats the scene with his language, but is quite explicit describing the scene in a comedic but graphic way. However, Jason is unable to comprehend what he says and has a mental breakdown stating, "I felt hungry and nevery and sick and jealous and sluggish and shamed and many things. Not proud and not pleased and not like I ever wanted to do that." (Mitchell 90). Breaking down the pieces, the reader learns that Jason although curious about the concept of sex, clearly has not aged mentally to process and handle situations that involve around sex. This relates back to his immaturity as a child while connecting it to his innocent state. Mitchell is able to capture the feelings a young adolescence feels around sex and improves the work through Jason's insightful and honest portrayal of his emotions. Then there is love. Love is a feeling that can't be describe and for Jason just the same. First crushes are the most love struck moments within a individuals life. Through a crush, one begins to shape their own definition of love. Jason shapes his through his own crush, Dawn Madden, and learns how that love for a person does not last forever. For starters, Jason has rules set up for "fancying girls'" (Mitchell 86) and how "It can be dangerous." (Mitchell 86), showing the basic elements of attraction. After a scene with Dawn Madden,

Jason rants, “ I’ll do my first kiss with her. Right here. She’d touch me. Right here.” (Mitchell 87). Here, he is fantasizing about his crush which is common among love-struck individuals. This sets up the tone for Jason’s fantasies surrounding girls for the rest of story with his love for Dawn vanishing completely. Jason confirms the lost feelings for Dawn in his phone conversation with his adult sister, Julia, saying, “ Yean. Into thin air. How does that happen?” (Mitchell 270) with Julia replying, “ Ah, search me little brother.” (Mitchell 270). This conversation draws attention to that love is feeling that causes both excitement and pain that could be either long-lasting or short moments like Jason’s love for Dawn. Plus, how it’s typical for a crush to vanish among all individuals even adults like Julia.

Smoking, sex, and drugs are strong adult factors that shape an adolescence growth stage. However, these factors lead to times where the individual could feel uncomfortable or mentally unstable though to lack of maturity to process these robust images. Innocence plays a key role by slowly bleeding out these images in small in takes for the adolescence to handle. In return, innocence is lost, thus the adolescence cannot consider themselves as a child any longer. They can only consider themselves as young adults. David Mitchell not only captures the loss of innocence among Jason using adult factors to affect his growth stage, he shows us how losing innocence is part of the adolescence stage to enter the adult world. However, los of innocence is not the only stage a young adolescence must go through.

The missing link for adolescences to go through are tribulations. These road bumps in a growth stage lead to negative effects but are quite essential to

the growth stage for adolescence. Jason's tribulations range from the Cold War, bullies, and the slow divorce among his parents. *Black Swan Green* takes place in 1982 Cold War England, with Jason experiencing the effects of the war among his village of Worcestershire. Jason found the war to be exciting not realizing the brutality of war until Tom Yew, a Royal Navy soldier, is killed while stationed on the HMS Coventry during the Falklands War. Tom Yew was widely known among his home village of Worcestershire, thus news of his death left a scar among the village, mourning his death for weeks to come. Jason's response to the situation is simply, "Tom Yew's death killed the thrill of war." (Mitchell 112). This trial among Jason helps shape his maturity when he states "I should be really be happy." (Mitchell 115) after a ceasefire was made in the Falklands realizing that Jason knows that this ceasefire isn't going to revive Tom Yew and rest of the soldiers that died in the war. Tribulations can lead to brutal honesty of reality that is essential to mature but bullies only serve as a road block to that growth. After being seen with his mom, Jason begins to be bullied by his classmates and referred to as 'maggot' throughout the school year. The bullying takes a toll on Jason both physically and mentally. Physically when he is, "smeared into the mud" (Mitchell 201) and mentally by the constant hurtful slurs like, "'What're yer smiling about, yer oily fuckin' maggot?'" (Mitchell 197). These factors lead to himself stating "Hang yourself." (Mitchell 211) showing us a brief suicide thought among Jason under the ridicule he receives from the bullies. These type of road blocks could only be fixed by the comfort of others. Holly Deblin, Jason's classmate, says, "'You're not a maggot. Don't let dickheads decide what you are.'" (Mitchell 211) to provide comfort for Jason. This comfort

helps Jason overcome the road block and continues with his life, but the bullying doesn't end till the end of the year. Sometime it could take years before the end is near, and divorces are the prime example. Divorces happen when there is an extreme unstable connection between the wife and husband leading to constant arguments and separating themselves from each other. In addition, divorces could lead to a painful scar among growing adolescences and take years to let it go and move on. Jason parents go through the divorce stage during the course of the year in the novel. Jason feels anxious about the affair, even suggesting past arguments between his parents when Julia asks for his rating on arguments. He even rates an argument " four fingers" (Mitchell 100) showing his fear for a divorce among his parents. These quarrels make Jason feel "... sick, cold, and old." (Mitchell 104) as he begins to comprehend the gravity of the situation involving his parents that raise and love him. He wishes to forget and not worry about the arguments when he states, " Wish Tomorrow's World would open up and swallow me." (Mitchell 105). By going through this stage, Jason matures when he comes to understand how things will never remain the same.

It takes a slap of reality for one senses to come into tune with the world. Mitchell emphasizes this in his literary work through the agony of death, pain from bullies, and the uncertainty of divorces. These trails not only define life, but they also help adolescences mature as proven with Jason when he responds to these situations in a much more mature and deep level in the tone of his voice. However, lose of innocence and tribulations do not define the end.

“ That’s because it’s not the end.” (Mitchell 294). This powerful closing sentence to the novel correlates with life never ends. By being with Jason over for a year in *Black Swan Green*, Mitchell shows us how life is full of beauty and wonder, but at the same time can bring tribulations and grief. These stages in life are the most present among adolescences who are going through the transitional stage of child to adult. Life is never over and continues to shape individuals one moment at a time. Mitchell wants us to realize that life will all was go on and it’s up to define their own life. The definition of life is only found at the end of adolescence. And the end marks the growth of child into adult.