

# How water imagery has been used to describe ben's path in mike nichols' film the ...

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## **Water Imagery in The Graduate**

The Graduate, released in 1967 and directed by Mike Nichols, is a groundbreaking film that brought to the screen the issues plaguing a young generation. Following the post-college life of Ben Braddock, the film depicts his journey through an unknown and unfamiliar world. One of the ways Nichols inventively portrays Ben's path is through water imagery. It is used in several different ways throughout the film, including Ben's fish tank and his parents' swimming pool. These examples of water imagery symbolize many different things, but most importantly, they are symbolic of Ben and also of the relationship he has with his parents and society.

A significant use of water imagery in the film is Ben's fish tank. Robert Beuka writes, " This focus on water imagery begins with the first shot of the film proper; after the opening credit sequence fades out, we get a shot of Ben staring into his fish tank, a recurring symbol that emphasizes Ben's feelings of entrapment and aloneness. In the midst of the circling fish, at the bottom of the tank, stands a miniature plastic man in scuba gear, a thematic counterpart to Ben and a foreshadowing of the very role he will play at the bottom of his pool in one of the central scenes of the film" (18). By using this motif, Nichols is suggesting that Ben is much like the fish living in the tank; he is swimming through life with no true purpose, unsure of where to go, or what to do. Ben is confined by the stifling ideals of his family, and on a greater scale, the ideals of society, much like the fish are confined by the four walls of their tank. In these scenes, Ben gazes longingly at the fish in the tank, seeming as if he would love to lead their carefree and easy life, not

realizing that he is essentially doing so. The fish have no real relationships with each other, which is similar to Ben, who has no truly meaningful relationship in his life. There are also “connections between this water imagery and [Ben’s] sexual affair with Mrs. Robinson...when Ben escapes his graduation party to return to his room and his position before the fishbowl; it is here that Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) insists that Ben drive her home, throwing his keys into the tank. His retrieval of the keys from the bottom of the tank marks the beginning of their relationship, which is established through the water imagery as an escape from the suffocating world of his parents’ existence” (Beuka 18). The fish tank is representative of Ben’s life in many different ways.

A major source of water imagery in the film is Ben’s parents’ swimming pool. According to Beuka, “Ben Braddock...is characterized in terms of his relationship to the jewel of the suburban backyard, the swimming pool. Much of the first half of the film is shot from poolside, with Nichols in effect using the swimming pool as a metonymic reminder of the significance of the suburban milieu” (14). Ben spends many days lazily swimming in and drifting around his parents’ pool. In fact, in one scene Ben is floating on a raft and when asked by his father what he is doing, Ben replies with a simple, “Drifting.” This is a very literal symbol for Ben’s drifting through life, while his parents’ pool serves as a symbol for the financial assistance that they are providing for him. One of the more symbolic scenes regarding the swimming pool is when his parents purchase him scuba diving gear, as mentioned above. They expect Ben to put on the gear and basically perform an act for

them, which is symbolic in a couple of different ways. The scuba gear is heavy and bulky, and is a symbol for the weight put on his shoulder by his parents, and furthermore by society, to find a job, go to graduate school, or just do something with his life. Ben is pushed into the water by his parents, which is symbolic of them pushing him into the real world. When Ben tries to surface, his father shoves him back under, again symbolizing his parents forcing him into something he does not want. This scene “ paints Ben as a victim, isolated and submerged beneath the shimmering waters of suburban mediocrity” (Beuka 18). As much as Ben does not want to be defined by society, he is, and Nichols uses water imagery to get the message across to viewers; “ in this regard, it is no surprise that the narrative of Ben’s sexual affair with Mrs. Robinson is intercut with scenes featuring him either lounging in or submerged in the waters of the pool...Ben-despite his wishes to the contrary-is forced to define his manhood in terms of his relationship to the suburban environment” (Beuka 14). The swimming pool motif symbolically serves many different points in relation to Ben’s life journey.

In conclusion, Nichols effectively uses water imagery to portray Ben’s meaningless drifting through life and his struggle with the ideals of his parents and society; “ both drawn to his suburban home-as evidenced by his habitual reappearance at the backyard pool-and repeatedly fleeing it, Ben seems unsure of his relationship to the home environment and, in a larger sense, of his ‘ place’ in life” (Beuka 15). On a greater scale, Ben is representative of the many young people who at the time were also unsure

of their own place in life. By using the water imagery, Nichols is able to bring a greater meaning of life to an entire generation of young people.