

Rites of passage in eleanor and park



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Rites of passage are a key element in adolescent literature. These are moments in which the character or characters do something where they essentially cross over the realm of adolescence to adulthood in some aspect. They are extremely common throughout the genre and hold a special place in the books for the characters, and the readers. There are several rites of passage in the novel *Eleanor and Park*. What makes these particular moments in the novel so special, and so important, is that they truly transform the character that goes through these rites of passage. An example of one of these moments is the fight between Parker and Steve. Many would say this is simply one moment that may cause a transformation in Parker, but is not important for the entire novel. The fact is that, this moment is crucial, not only for Parker, but for the entire novel. Without this defining moment in Park's life many other rites of passage may have never took place and his relationship with Eleanor may have never flourished into what it became at the end of the novel. The fight between Park and Steve is the catalyst that fundamentally transforms Park as a character and a person, and gives a pathway for more rites of passage throughout the novel.

This fight that occurs between Park and Steve is one of the first moments that can be considered a "rite of passage". Now while this may only seem like a "boys being boys" moment, this is actually a moment which helps define Park for the rest of the novel. For background on this moment in the novel *Eleanor and Park* have started to become increasingly intimate, and on this particular day Steve, Park's pseudo "friend" and bully to Eleanor, starts a chant on the bus making fun of Eleanor's hair, weight, and pretty much everything else a bully would tend to joke about. Park is clearly enraged by

this and once he gets off the bus, intends to fight Steve. This escalates to point where Park kicks Steve in the face, knocking one of his teeth loose (Rowell 130-131). Once again, many would argue that this is rite of passage, but not as important as some other because it is just a fight. The difference between this rite of passage and the typical “ boy gets into a fight” rite of passage, is that it shows a clear transition in Park that was not there before the fight occurred. Park was not technically picked on during this time in the novel, but Park hints that is only because he lays low, and made “ friends” with Steve and Tina. Getting in the fight with Steve shows that he has become willing to stand for what he loves or believes, even if it comes to fisticuffs.

To explain why this moment is so important in the novel, one must take a further in depth analysis of this rite of passage to see how it defines Park, and the story, for the rest of the novel. The first being, that this moment clearly transforms Park as a person, and adds more depth into his character. Before this fight Park is a shy boy who only gets by floating under the radar and not making waves. This changes after the fight, as Park transforms into someone who is not afraid to stick out. This is proven when he says, “ The fight had changed something on the bus... Maybe it was because he stood up to Steve.” (Rowell 139). His fight with Steve shows that he has courage to be himself. This leads to other rites of passage, when Park stands up for himself. One of these moment is when Park wants to wear makeup to school. In this moment he has to stand up to his own parents to do what he wants to do. His father wants Park to wash the makeup of because he thought it made Park “ look like a girl” (Rowell 218). Park stands up against his father and

refuses to wash it off. This shows that Park actually was making his own decisions about life, something his father wanted him to do. While it may not have been what his father wanted, but Park was finally standing up for himself and making those decisions. This is proof that after the fight with Steve, that Park found courage inside himself to do more with his life than sit on the bus and quietly read comic books.

Maybe the moment that becomes so important in this novel is what Park says immediately after the fight. At this point, both Park and Steve are bloody and tired, Steve asks why Park decided to kick him in the face. Park's answer was short and simple, but would help fundamentally transform the novel. Park says, "Leave...my girlfriend...alone" (Rowell 131). This was the moment where Park basically announces to the world that Eleanor is his girlfriend. Many people might argue that this is of minimal importance, but the truth is that it is a radical transformation of Park, and his relationship with Eleanor. Before this, Park and Eleanor's relationship was a secret, Park had denied it to his parents and it was generally something that almost looks like Park was ashamed of. What this allows to happen is the further growth of their relationship. Now, their relationship can grow from a crush between two school kids, to the real honest, loving relationship it becomes later in the novel.

This novel has many rites of passages, and they all are important to the story of two adolescents who transform into two young adults in love. What is so fascinating is how important this fight is to that narrative. If anyone would still oppose this statement then they would have to find a way to answer some simple questions. If Park had never stood up to Steve, would he

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have stood up against his father, Richie, or anyone in this book? If this fight never takes place, would Eleanor and Park's relationship flourish the way it did? There are so many more questions that could be asked but the truth is that they are unnecessary because the fight did happen. Park did take a stand. Park grew as a person and did crossover the invisible boundary between the boy on the bus who was afraid to make a seen, to the Park that stood up for himself, and for Eleanor. This fight does transform Park as a character, but clearly this simple schoolyard fight changes the course of the novel.