

"best friends" or not: analyzing keith and stephen



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Spies* by Michael Frayn, the description of Keith as Stephen's 'best friend' does not suit him nearly as much as the 'officer corps in [their] two man army. Keith is very obviously depicted as pushy, bossy, dominant and a bully on some occasions, always needing to be in charge, always needing to 'have someone to be braver than.' It is these times when we see just how little of a true friend Keith is to Stephen, and how he acts more like his leader than his equal.

Right at the beginning of the novel in chapter 2, Stephen feels as if he has 'good fortune in being Keith's friend' which shows just how much Stephen is grateful towards Keith, to the point where he is willing to be pushed around and led by him. During Stephen and Keith's first interaction, Keith's social standing is much higher than Stephen's as he lives in a posh, impeccable house, 'number 2. Chollerton. The Haywards.' And the boys are 'socially color coded' as Stephen goes to a public school while Keith goes to a private school. It is also worth noting that Keith is most likely the way he is due to his home life. Mr. Hayward is depicted as apathetic, formal and it has even been blatantly stated that he abuses Keith.

In the third chapter, as Stephen and Keith are investigating Mrs. Hayward, Keith misspells words in their log book multiple times. Despite this, Stephen doesn't call him out and late in the novel when Mrs. Hayward realizes that Keith has misspelt 'private' as 'privet', Stephen has half a mind to take responsibility for it as to spare Keith the embarrassment. This shows how low Stephen is willing to stoop for Keith, perhaps because he thinks he owes it to him.

When Mrs. Hayward visits Braemar and tells Stephen that Keith is 'easily led', Stephen is left staring at her in disbelief, unable to even imagine Keith being led by him. He wonders how Keith manages to fool both their mothers into believing that Stephen is the leader. This leads to sympathy towards Keith for a change rather than Stephen, as Mrs. Hayward's words imply that Keith is pushed around at home, presumably by his father.

Keith is also depicted as a flat out bully in various scenarios as he does not acknowledge Stephen's bravery and often undermines, belittles and mocks him, such as when Stephen gives Keith the sock that he found in the tin box or when Stephen offers theories about Mrs. Hayward's whereabouts. Keith ignores him and his 'eyelids come down' in disapproval to show that Stephen that his ideas don't deserve acknowledgement and all ideas that are not Keith's are invalid. Juxtaposition between Keith and his father clearly show the same condescending sneer and arrogant expression.

Further in the novella, Keith also mocks Stephen for 'hiding [his] face like a little baby' when he sees the man near the tin box. The hypocrisy of this statement shines through soon after though when they hear someone approaching, and they both hide their face in the mud. That is the first time we see the boys as equals with the second being when they ran back to the Close after terrorizing the tramp, 'neither of [them] leader, neither of [them] led.' This shows that fear is the equalizing force between the boys and it also shows that Stephen has now started realizing Keith's role and so now is trying to take more of a leadership position.

Another example of Keith's dominant nature arises when he makes Stephen take an oath on the bayonet that Stephen would not tell anyone otherwise Keith would kill him. His arrogance is also shown in how he must always take the binoculars and walk in front of Stephen and in how Stephen comes to fear him, letting him boss him around and being grateful to just be allowed near Keith. This causes the reader not only to be enraged at Keith for bossing Stephen around but also for the reader to be enraged at Stephen for letting Keith push him around and for hero worshiping him.

This novella claims to be about two best friends, but by the way the reader is shown Keith and Stephen's interactions, their relationship and their dynamics, it is made obvious that one of them is definitely the leader while the other one is led. Overall, it is impossible for the reader to feel no sympathy towards Stephen in his immense misfortune in being Keith's so-called friend.