

Bucky's search for approval in 'nemesis'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As depicted in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*, Eugene 'Bucky' Cantor is an extremely athletic boy who was admired by most people for his appearance and attitude. Especially the kids he was supervising as playground director during the summer holidays saw him as a role model, they wanted to be like him. Bucky's attitude was one to be praised, he worked hard in his grandfather's grocery store, he excelled in sports and he was acting like a real leader at the playground during the summer where he looked well after each kid. He made sure that he had everything in his life under control; he took good care of his grandmother; nothing was too much for him with everything he did, he always wanted to help out and do the right thing and he had a beautiful girlfriend named Marcia who he was planning to marry in the near future. To cut it short, he was admired by most for all the good things he did. But even though people admired him, he was not always all that happy because he was constantly looking for approval for the situations that were not familiar to him. His late grandfather taught him how to act and react in certain situations and he earned his grandfather's approval by doing extremely well. To earn this approval later on, he tried to join the army in vain, he tried to be a good playground director where he wanted to fight polio as much as he could and he tried to be there for his girlfriend. Because his grandfather was his role model, all his actions came back to the things that his grandfather had taught him.

But even though Bucky did the best he could, he had the feeling he let people down and that ruined his life later on. But what was it exactly that ruined his life? Why was Bucky so desperately looking for approval during his entire lifetime and where did he get this hard working attitude from? His

grandfather taught him a lot of good things, for example how to be tough: “ And it was from his grandfather’s intrepidity that he learned how to pit himself against any obstacle...” (Nemesis p20), “ The grandfather saw to the boy’s masculine development, always on the alert to eradicate any weakness that might have been bequeathed” (Nemesis p22). But he lacked in one thing; giving enough approval; “ His grandfather’s dominance wasn’t always easy to abide, but when Eugene met his expectations, the praise was never grudging.” (Nemesis p22). Bucky’s grandfather asked a lot from his grandson, maybe too much, but when he reached the high expectations he showed his affection and gratitude towards his grandson. In this way Bucky got familiar to the things that he should do in order to be like his role model. Because his grandfather made him tough, Bucky wanted to join the army to do the right thing and fight for his country. But he was rejected because of his poor eyesight. He was devastated by it because his close friends were accepted and he had to stay home and he could not help the greater cause as he wanted to. After his grandfather passed away he still had him on his mind constantly. An example of this is when the playground was visited by two cars full of Italians looking for trouble: “ The old man was dead of a heart attack by July 1944, when the ten Italians drove up to the playground and single-handedly Mr. Cantor (Bucky) turned them back, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there throughout the confrontation.” (Nemesis p25). Of course his grandfather could not have taught Bucky about how to act in every situation, even if he had lived longer.

In those situations, Bucky had to make his own decisions and he wanted them to be in style with his grandfather’s lessons and rules. Obviously this

could not happen without a conflict; Bucky had to decide between acting what was best for him and what he thought his grandfather would approve of. During the summer holidays he became a playground director for the school kids. In that time he was watching over the kids that came down to the school playground for activities, boys played softball and girls usually did some rope skipping, to pass their time in the big summer break. Each kid loved Bucky and he was the role model for a lot of them “ His athletic, pigeon-toed trot was already being imitated by the playground kids (...) For some of the boys his entire bearing had become theirs both on and off the playing field.” (Nemesis p13). This was not just his way of walking but also his handling in things, for example towards the formerly mentioned Italian ‘ invaders’ who came to the playground looking for trouble. The Italians claimed to spread polio, since this was a major disease in that time, people were scared. Bucky made sure the Italians did not come near the kids and he stood his ground (see last quote in the former paragraph), so in the end, he was the big hero. But in Bucky's idea, it was just the way he should have handled just like his grandfather wanted him to. During summer time all the major cities had the problem of the disease of polio, a disease for which there was no vaccine at the time, “ The first (polio vaccine) was developed by Jonas Salk and first tested in 1952.”([http://en. wikipedia. org/wiki/Polio_vaccine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polio_vaccine)), and people did not know where it came from but they knew it was dangerous.

During the time that Bucky was playground director, the summer of 1944, polio was a big problem in the large cities and some of ‘ his kids’ got polio too and a few of them sadly died. After all these polio cases he started

thinking about closing the playground down for the safety of the kids, but he was not sure what to do exactly. On the one hand he thought he shouldn't be such a coward, people are dying in World War 2, fighting for their country and he cannot even keep a playground running where kids could be infected by a disease. On the other hand he thought of the safety and health of the kids; was it still safe for them to come down to the playground and do all the activities together? " Mr. Cantor (Bucky) wondered if for the rest of the summer he oughtn't shut down all sports (...) That way he would at least be doing something, though whether it was something that would make any difference to spread polio, he had no idea." (Nemesis p53). After he started thinking of closing down the playground, more and more kids fell ill and some parents were keeping their kids at home out of precaution. He still felt he should do something, so he visited his girlfriend's father, Dr. Steinberg, to ask for advice. He told Bucky that it was of no use to shut down the playground if the city did not tell him to. If he would do it anyway, the kids wouldn't sit at home all day, they would play ball somewhere else, so it would not be of any use. Dr. Steinberg also told him how he admired Bucky for the responsibility he took, because it was a big one; managing a playground during polio season at his age. So Bucky got the answers and approval he wanted in an unknown situation to him, a situation that he was not taught by his grandfather. After he left Dr. Steinberg's home help came to him from an unexpected direction, his girlfriend called him to ask if he would come to the summer camp she was working at, so he could get out of the polio misery, before he realized, he agreed to come. Even though he had the feeling could not let the kids down, he would be running away from something and that was not the way he was used to handle situations. After

he resigned his job as playground director and he made sure that the neighbors would check on his grandmother daily, he left for the summer camp Indian Hill to go to Marcia (now fiancée) and her two younger sisters.

Bucky's job at the camp was Waterfront director, he was in charge of the safety of the kids at the waterfront and he was also supposed to teach them water skills. He couldn't have been happier than being at Indian Hill, he could see Marcia, he was away from the city with its ferocious heat and polio and, not the least important, he could teach sports, especially swimming, and practice his own diving, which was one of his most favorite things to do.

While he was doing his job, he even taught one of his fellow counselors, Donald, how to improve his diving. Now he was so close to his fiancée, they sneaked out together to a small island in the lake of the summer camp, there they would cuddle, kiss and make love, as each newly engaged couple would do. So all in all, everything worked out for him as he hoped. But

unfortunately his mind was in conflict about him leaving as playground director. Almost every time Marcia and he were together, he talked about the bad conditions he left the playground kids in, so it was not all that romantic, he was feeling sorry for the kids and bad about himself. He started thinking of how lucky he was being there and that no playground kid, not even mentioning his friends in the war, had that luxury, he was feeling guilty towards the rest of the world: " Here he had everything that Dave and Jake (his friends in the war) were without and that everyone in Newark was without. But what he no longer had was a conscience he could live with."

(Nemesis p174). He was afraid that he would disappoint some people by heading back to Newark: his fiancée, her two little sisters, Dr. Steinberg and

the camp director, but he had no choice. He had to do the right thing like his grandfather taught him: “Rashly, he had yielded to fear, and under the spell of fear he had betrayed his boys and betrayed himself, when all he had to do was to stay where he was and do his job.” (Nemesis p 176). But the next morning his conscience had eased down, he got to his senses and decided to stay, he could not be of any help since he was not a doctor, he told himself. When he called his grandmother from the summer camp later on, she told him that there were a lot more polio cases in the city and that the mayor had ordered to close up all the things where kids came together, so even the playgrounds.

Bucky was feeling sick when he heard this, if he had just stayed on a few more days, he would not have had to quit at all and he would not have had to run away. Then it would have been the mayor's decision and he could have gone to summer camp without regret. His grandmother also told him that one of his best friends died in the war, the war he could not be a part of. So he ran away from fear from a simple disease and his best buddy was killed in the war, he did an inexcusable thing but it was no use to be going home now. A week later the news came that counselor Donald got some signs of polio, after he was rushed to hospital everything seemed to return to normal. But when the doctor came to inform the kids about this, Bucky thought of the fact that he might have carried the disease to the camp since he had been so close to Donald, so he asked the doctor to check him out. The doctor said it would be very unlikely that he would be an healthy carrier of polio, but that it could do no harm to check him out anyway. The test did show that Bucky was carrying polio at the time and he hospitalized

immediately. Not much later a few other counselors and kids got polio too, among them one of Marcia's sisters, and consequently the summer camp was closed down. Although nobody blamed him and there was no evidence that he brought the polio germs in, he still felt very guilty, how could polio else have got into the camp if it were not for him? During his time in the hospital he would not see anybody except for his grandmother, he was too afraid to see Marcia. Once Dr. Steinberg called and asked to at least talk to Marcia, but Bucky refused because of his guilt. Then Marcia visited him anyway and they parted after having had a fight. The fight originated from Bucky's stubbornness; Marcia asked him to proceed the wedding and to pick up everything as it was before summer camp had started, but Bucky would not hear of it. She deserved a better man, someone who could take care of a family, not one in a wheelchair or on crutches, he was not worthy of her. And even though Marcia tried to convince him that she did not mind and that she loved him so much, he wouldn't give in. Bucky felt the guilt of all the things he had done according to the way he wanted and were different to what his grandfather had taught him. He couldn't make another mistake by picking up his old life with Marcia, he would be dependent on her and could not live with that idea.

Over the course of his entire young life, Bucky had been looking for his grandfather's approval, even though he was not actively aware of it all the time. He saw him as a role model but he could not teach Bucky everything and give approval in every situation. During all the main events in this story he started out by doing what he wanted most: trying to join the army, being playground director, fighting polio, joining his fiancée at summer camp and

being the good person who did the right thing. But every time things did not work out the way he had planned to: he got rejected by the army because of his eyesight, he left his position of playground director, he could not make a difference in fighting polio, he could not be romantic with his fiancée because of his regret, he probably brought polio to the camp and he blamed himself for not being the good guy. So he wasn't allowing himself to choose for the good way he enjoyed or the way was best but the way he should have earned his grandfather's approval he so desperately longed for. When he acted according to common sense insights and it didn't work out, Bucky convinced himself that he should have to acted according to his grandfather's rules so everything would have turned out the right way. Now he had not earned his grandfather's approval and he started to blame himself, even though the things he did were not bad at all, but it just worked out differently than he had anticipated them to. The effect of getting approval and looking for it were the start of Bucky ruining his own life. If he had used common sense and had put his grandfather's lessons in perspective, he probably would still have got and spread the polio at Indian Hill, but he would not have felt that regret and he would have had a great wife. Polio was not the start of Bucky getting paralyzed; it was his lack of common sense that started to paralyze his actions.