

The thing in the forest essay



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In A. S. Byatt's *The Thing in the Forest*, it seems as though Primrose has moved on from the childhood trauma to which she and Penny were exposed. The two girls grow up in very dissimilar ways: Penny finding ways to mask her trauma, and Primrose extroverting herself to cope with it. The text suggests that extroversion is a healthier coping method than masking. Byatt's characters Penny and Primrose have many similarities, yet their differences are what shape the way they will deal with the trauma they experience as children.

In the text, we learn that Penny "[is] thin and dark and taller, possibly older. (Byatt 3) Her name along with her description of being thin and dark can relate her to currency. Throughout the text, we are given examples that lead us to believe Penny lives a more materialistic life. We learn that she goes to college for developmental psychology. (Byatt 10) She values the finer things like education and professional attire. Penny works hard to cover up trauma, much like a child puts their change (or pennies) in their piggy bank to save up for something they want. She is described as a "good student," (Byatt 10) so suggestively, her coping mechanisms would correlate with the approach of a scholar.

Scholars often deal with their stressors internally as they view their failures to be self-inflicted. On the other hand, Primrose, who is not a scholar, takes a different approach. She is initially described as "plump and blond and curly." (Byatt 3) Her bright and plump stature represents joy and comfortableness. Her assortment of jobs are all those where an extrovert would thrive. With the evidence of these jobs, we can assume she is an extrovert, and would

deal with internal stressors in that manner. Primrose's name relates to a flower, or rose, that blooms early.

When the main characters meet again as grown women, we see that Primrose has moved on, or bloomed, from the trauma of seeing the Thing in the forest. Also, in the same section, Primrose is wearing a floral skirt. (Byatt 11) Byatt's characters Penny and Primrose literally and figuratively embody two different personalities. Their personalities are hard-wired to cope with things in different ways. Although the two protagonists lead different lives as they grow up, they also share similarities which suggest they are somehow stuck in the trauma they share at the time of their reconnection at the old mansion.

First off, neither woman is married. (Byatt 10) For this generation, the children of World War II, being unwed is not common. This suggests that Penny and Primrose have not matured to the point of marriage, and are stuck in a child mindset that believes in giant worms and does not rely on romantic companionship. Also, both women work with children; Penny as a psychologist and Primrose as a storyteller. This also suggests their connection to a child's mindset, as they chose professions of which they could relate.

Penny's choice to be a child psychologist more evidently proposes the idea that she has not moved on from her trauma as she is trained to help children with issues like her own. The trauma of seeing the Thing has even driven the characters to return to the forest. When Penny and Primrose walk into the forest, they are approaching the fear that has overwhelmed them for many

years. The two women are similarly stuck in time and fear with the Thing. Penny uses her education and success to mask her feelings about the Thing, which can only hide her fear, not help to overcome it.

When her father died, her mother shut herself out to the rest of the world. (Byatt 10) Since her mother was emotionally dead and her father literally dead, it can be assumed that Penny led a solitary and serious childhood, which explains why she spent so much time studying. She went on to become a child psychologist, and works with children with severe autism. (Byatt 10) She believes she can relate to these children because she and they know the struggle of the real world, unlike most. (Byatt 19) She chose a profession that you would think would help her deal with her own trauma and help her unpack and solve her issues with the Thing.

However, instead of using her knowledge to help overcome her trauma, she uses it as an excuse to relate to her patients. Instead of seeing her fear and moving past it, she's devoted her life to it. As an adult, Penny is still tall and thin. She wears professional attire in neutral colors; she blends in. Blending in is a sign of intimidation. She does not want to draw attention to herself because someone might notice she's more than a suit, she is troubled. Her nice things and good education are her attempts to mask it and at least appear normal, but they don't help her cope at all.

When she returns to the forest, she is overwhelmed by the nostalgia of it, and lets her fear engulf her. In her final moments in the text, " her nerves [relax] [and] her blood [slows]," (Byatt 21) suggesting that she dies in the forest. Penny's life seems very successful on paper, but her secret turmoil

with this issue ends up taking over every aspect of that successful life, leaving her emotionally, if not physically, dead. Primrose, however, is able to express herself and heal from the terror she experienced long ago. As an adult, she becomes a storyteller.

She is even referred to as “ Aunty Primrose. ” (Byatt 10) It makes sense that Primrose would have an occupation like this, since she is an extrovert. It allows her to express herself through fantasy, even though she is initially troubled by the Thing. She has bright colorful chairs for the children. Her surroundings suggest that she is very happy. Although it still troubles her, she isn't held back by the Thing. When visiting the mansion where she and Penny stayed as children, she goes out into the forest. While there, we notice that Primrose isn't fearful of this place.

She even takes her focus off the Thing and admires the beauty of the forest. (Byatt 17) This hints at her triumph over the Thing. Even when in the forest where the incident happened, it doesn't trigger negative responses for her. She is able to move on and tour the area, not consuming herself with an event that happened so many years ago. In many ways, Primrose's ability to move on after her visit to the forest suggests the importance of expressing yourself. By telling stories to children, and eventually her own, she is able to release herself from that trauma.

Penny and Primrose take very different approaches to coping with their childhood sighting of the Thing. Penny tries to mask her struggle by blending in and internalizing her fears. Even though she is a child psychologist, she cannot be her own client and is eventually completely consumed by her

trauma. Primrose goes on to become a storyteller. By confronting her fear and using storytelling as an outlet, she is able to overcome the trauma. This suggests that, compared to bottling up fear, expressing fear is a better coping mechanism.