

Longman Lecture on T.C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake" **by Diane Thiel**

Part I – Reading

“There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were all dangerous characters then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. When we wheeled our parents’ whining station wagons out onto the street we left a patch of rubber half a block long. We drank gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird and Bali Hai. We were nineteen. We were bad. We read André Gide and struck elaborate poses to show that we didn’t give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.”

T.C Boyle’s poignant first paragraph of his well-known story “Greasy Lake” sets up the time, the characters, the setting, and the tone in a very brief space.

“Greasy Lake” is the title piece of Boyle’s 1985 collection, a story that draws on his own wild teenage years. Boyle was born into an Irish working class family, and both of his parents were alcoholics. He has often written and spoken about his difficult and rebellious adolescence, and how this personal history is reflected in his stories.

Critic Stephen Crist has said that Boyle depicts our world through his “funhouse mirror.” In Boyle’s writing, there is often a darkly comic undercurrent, and ordinary situations seem to take on a surreal quality in his depiction of them. Boyle establishes a darkly humorous, ironic tone from the first paragraph of “Greasy Lake,” which continues throughout the story, even as the characters cross over a threshold to experience what it means to really become “dangerous characters” that night.

Part II – Interpreting

In Part I, I discussed the first paragraph and the way it begins to establish the setting and the characters.

The second paragraph of the story continues to present these elements, and begins to develop one of the central concerns of the story – the man-made world in opposition to the natural one. Note, in particular, the final sentence of the second paragraph:

“We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets. This was nature.”

The second paragraph also continues to establish the tone more firmly. When Boyle writes “This was nature,” he reinforces the tongue-in-cheek tone in the same way he does through the structure of his statements in the first paragraph: “We were nineteen. We were bad.” The brevity of these statements, delivered as absolutes, is a clue to their being meant as ironic. (The statement “this was nature” is repeated later in the story, as will be discussed in the next section.)

There is a cinematic quality throughout the story – often in the way scenes are described. After the boys’ descent into Greasy Lake, in the paragraph beginning “Blond head nodded at blond head,” the characters “suddenly dropped branches, bottles and rocks and sprang for their car in unison, as if they’d choreographed it.” There are a number of explicit film references throughout the story, such as the “toad emerging from the loaf” in the film *Virgin Spring* and the reference to the narrator “inching forward, elbows and knees,” his “belly pressed to the muck, thinking of guerrillas and commandos and [the film] *The Naked and the Dead*.”

Boyle uses these film references to create the effect of “life imitating art” (instead of art imitating life” as we more often think of it) and to underscore that the characters are emulating bad behavior. He hints at this idea throughout, specifically when he says:

“In one of those nasty little epiphanies for which we are prepared by films and TV and childhood visits to the funeral home ...I understood what it was that bobbed there so inadmissibly in the dark.”

“Greasy Lake” presents a kind of “memento mori,” a moment of recognizing mortality. The boys initiate a series of events that get them into serious trouble and almost lead to tragedy in their lives. In undergoing these events, they seem to reach an epiphany about the choices in their lives. At the end of the story, they turn down the offer to party with some girls: “I just looked at her. I thought I was going to cry. Digby broke the silence. No thanks, he said, leaning over me. ‘Some other time.’”

Though Digby doesn’t entirely refuse and still says, “some other time,” we do get a sense that both of these characters have undergone a significant transformation after their night at, and in, the murky waters of Greasy Lake. The character who thinks he is going to cry is a far cry from the self-described “bad” character of the story’s first paragraph.

Part III -- Writing

There are a multitude of ways to approach writing about “Greasy Lake.”

You could think about the piece in connection with other stories you have read. For instance, Louise Erdrich’s “The Red Convertible,” also discussed on this Web site, has certain similarities to Boyle’s story, as well as significant differences to explore.

Comparing “Greasy Lake” to “The Red Convertible” would offer a number of different possibilities for drawing lines of connection, while also establishing these stark differences – from the characters, to the importance of the car as a symbol in each of the stories, to the trials the characters in each story undergo, to the dramatic tension building to the conclusion of each. In each story, there is a descent into the dark water. Yet only in “Greasy Lake,” do both characters emerge from it intact.

Another approach would be to trace a distinct aspect of the story, such as the film references and their significance, as discussed in Part II.

You could focus on the significance of the setting of the story, and perhaps its importance in establishing a certain theme, such as the man-made vs. the natural world. The statement “This was nature” in the second paragraph is echoed at the end of the story, after the boys emerge from the lake at dawn:

“There was a smell in the air, raw and sweet at the same time, the smell of the sun firing buds and opening blossoms. I contemplated the car. It lay there like a wreck along the highway, like a steel sculpture left over from a vanished civilization. Everything was still. This was nature.”

You might also think about the story in terms of the “trials and revelations” the characters undergo, a theme that Joseph Campbell’s work often discusses. The boys in “Greasy Lake” certainly have a kind of epiphany there in the “primordial ooze” of the lake.

Part I – Reading

Questions and Sample Answers

1. Read Boyle’s first paragraph carefully. In this small space, he uses heightened imagery that appeals to each of the five senses. What images can you identify that allow the reader to see, hear, smell, feel, and even taste the scene?

Sample Answer:

In the opening paragraph of “Greasy Lake,” the more common visual images of “leather jackets,” “toothpicks in our mouths,” and “elaborate poses” are intensified by the way these and other images also appeal to other senses as well. We can feel the texture of toothpicks and leather jackets. We smell the “glue and ether” as well as the acrid smoke of the tires as they leave that “patch of rubber half a block long.” We can hear the “parents’ whining station wagons”. We can taste the “gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird and Bali Hai.” In a brief paragraph, Boyle uses details that draw the reader into the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and visceral sensations of the story.

2. Continue your close reading of this paragraph. What can you tell about the time, characters, the setting, and the tone?

Sample Answer:

Boyle begins the story by declaring that “there was a time.” He doesn’t pin it down, but the details clue us in to the time period as the late 1960’s or early 70’s. The characters begin to be shaped from the first paragraph, as boys who imagine themselves to be “bad” and “dangerous characters.” The use of words such as “poses” combined with the fact that they are driving their parents’ station wagon establishes the somewhat ironic tone that persists throughout the story. And the physical setting is pointed to by the destination of the station wagon, which also functions as a symbol, especially later in the story. By the final sentence of the first paragraph, we know where the boys are headed, and what the main setting of the story will be: “At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.”

Part II – Interpreting

Questions and Sample Answers

1.

The discussion notes the importance of the film references throughout the story and names a few. They contribute to Boyle's creating an effect of "life imitating art," instead of the opposite. What additional examples can you find? Can you think of any additional reasons for Boyle to have included them?

Sample Answer:

In addition to those mentioned in the lecture, "Greasy Lake" has numerous other references to film, direct ones as well as more subtle allusions. For instance, Digby's "apocryphal tales of Bruce Lee types and of the raw power invested in lightning blows from coiled wrists, ankles, and elbows" invokes the martial arts movies. Another reference is this parenthetical aside: "What happened next?" the detective asks the murderer from beneath the turned-down brim of his porkpie hat. I don't know, the murderer says, something came over me. Exactly." Such references point to the effect of TV and film on the actions and choices of the characters.

2.

What is the significance of the setting in the story? What significant theme of the story begins to emerge in the very title of "Greasy Lake"?

Sample Answer:

The title, "Greasy Lake," sets up the theme of the artificial versus the natural, the human-induced in contrast with the natural world. The setting of the story is highly significant, as it provides a literal murk which the boys descend into. As they are undergoing their descent into the dark, there is a physical setting that matches their metaphysical journey. The fact that Greasy Lake is "fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans," is highly significant in the narrative, especially in contrast with the later depiction of the lake as, despite the murk, "raw and sweet at the same time. The smell of sun firing buds and opening blossoms." The setting functions to advance the plot of the story, but it is also highly symbolic and of vital importance to a central theme of the story.

Part III – Writing

Questions and Sample Answers

1. What trials and revelations does the main character of “Greasy Lake” undergo? You might research and utilize Joseph Campbell’s discussion of “the hero’s journey” in works of literature, as well as the “trials and revelations” that characters undergo.

Sample Answer:

In “Greasy Lake,” the characters’ journey involves a descent into the dark “primordial ooze” of the lake. They engage in a series of actions that threaten to destroy their lives. Thinking they have killed the “bad greasy character” they encounter, they proceed to attack his girlfriend, in a moment described as “the first of the Ur crimes behind us, the second in progress.” The series of trials the boys undergo that night lead to significant revelations in their lives. Joseph Campbell writes of the trials and revelations as being the crux of the hero’s journey in works of literature. In “Greasy Lake,” the physical descent into the dark and emergence from it is mirrored by the characters’ journey into the underworld of that night, and their emergence with a different perspective on their own lives and even on the natural world.

2.

Creative Writing Approach: After identifying the images appealing to the five senses in Boyle’s opening paragraph, as suggested in Part I, now write a paragraph about your own high school years, using imagery that appeals to each of the five senses.

Sample Answer:

With a name like Beach High, and the fact that the beach was a short walk from the high school, one might imagine the frequent long lunch periods. Good students, still we came back with the ocean in our hair, smelling of suntan oil, our skin reddened, and not only from the sun. We frequently screeched into the parking lot after a “lunch hour” that had extended into fifth period European History, a course seniors had learned to take, not so much for an interest in European History as to have the right teacher, a retired college professor who didn’t seem to notice that students frequently came forty-five minutes late to the hour-long class.