B. Wordsworth

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF V. S. NAIPAUL

V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932, which at the time was a British colony. Naipaul's grandparents had immigrated to Trinidad from India at the end of the 19th century and both worked as indentured servants. In his many works of fiction and nonfiction, Naipaul grappled with the history and internal dynamics of colonization and decolonization in various British colonies, frequently through adopting a wry, comic voice. Although educated at Oxford University on scholarship in hopes of learning the craft of writing, Naipaul struggled to find his footing as a writer after graduating and later had harsh words about his Oxford experience. His early novels, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), are set in Trinidad and established Naipaul as a fresh voice offering a unique perspective of a place that was given little representation in literature at the time. Although Naipaul lived in London off and on for the better part of his career, he was a geographic and intellectual adventurer and spent time in various places including India, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. He wrote about his experiences in works of fiction and nonfiction that reflects a complex and not always sympathetic perspective of the native peoples of these lands. He also employed increasingly complex narrative and linguistic styles in such mid-career novels as *A Flag on the Island* (1967) and *The Mimic Men* (1967). Naipaul's best-known work, *A Bend in the River*, was published in 1979 and, as in much of Naipaul's fiction, explores the dynamics of postcolonialism, this time in Africa. Naipul was knighted in 1990 and awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"B. Wordsworth" is set during the 1940s in Port of Spain, a small town on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. The story forms part of a collection of interlinked stories, all told by a boy narrator who is based on Naipaul's own experiences growing up on Miguel Street in Port of Spain. *Miguel Street* is set during World War II, but the war doesn't play a significant role in the stories. The stories do implicitly comment on Trinidad's long history as a European colony (Spain colonized the island in the 16th century and eventually ceded it to Great Britain in the 19th century). Trinidad didn't gain independence until 1962, so the characters in "B. Wordsworth" are still living under British rule. In the *Miguel Street* stories, it's clear that 20th-century Port of Spain is economically depressed. The reader can infer that these conditions are largely the result of European nations exploiting Trinidad for its natural resources and enslaving the island's native population for centuries. The character of B. Wordsworth in the eponymous story would seem to stand apart from the people living on run-down Miguel Street, but he finally fails to rise above the difficult economic circumstances of his life and presumably dies poor and alone. Also of note is that B. Wordsworth himself is based on a real historical figure: the famous British Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who died in 1850.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The short story "B. Wordsworth" forms part of *Miguel Street*, a novel of interlinked short stories set in the town of Port of Spain, Trinidad. The structure of the novel is similar to such works as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, OH*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Miguel Street* was the first novel Naipaul wrote (although not the first published) and is the only novel of his that features this narrative structure, although a later novel, *A Way in the World*, experiments with form and content in unique and challenging ways. Among Naipaul's best-known works are *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *A Bend in the River* (1979). The former novel adopts a postcolonial lens in telling a serio-comic story of a man of East Indian descent living in Trinidad prior to it becoming an independent republic. The latter novel is set in Africa and has been compared to Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* in its depiction of the odyssey its protagonist undertakes into the depths of Africa. The stories in *Miguel Street*, including "B. Wordsworth," are widely regarded as giving representation to the decolonized peoples of Trinidad and Tobago and exploring in sympathetic if not always flattering ways the dynamics of postcolonialism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** B. Wordsworth
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1959
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial Literature
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Port of Spain, a town in the republic of Trinidad and Tobago
- **Climax:** The narrator pays a final visit to the dying B. Wordsworth.
- **Antagonist:** Lack of economic and cultural opportunity
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Writing History. *Miguel Street*, the novel that includes the story "B. Wordsworth," has its origins in a short story that Naipaul submitted for publication. The publisher challenged Naipaul to turn the story into a novel, which Naipaul did in a white heat over the course of five months.

Caribbean Voices. One of Naipaul's earliest jobs was to host a BBC radio program, *Caribbean Voices*, that featured the work of up-and-coming Caribbean writers, several of whom, including George Lamming and Derek Walcott, went on to great acclaim.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator of "B. Wordsworth," an unnamed boy, meets an unusual man, B. Wordsworth, who comes to the boy's house one afternoon and asks to watch the bees that populate the palm trees in the boy's yard. The man introduces himself as a poet and says that the B. of his name stands for "Black." He tells the boy that he is the brother of "White Wordsworth," the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, and offers to sell the boy a poem. When the boy's mother turns him down, he admits that nobody has yet purchased any of his poetry.

When the boy encounters B. Wordsworth again a week later, B. Wordsworth invites the boy to his home to eat mangoes. The boy notes the overgrown yard with several different types of **trees** growing in it and, after eating a mango, returns home to his irate mother. He runs away and, returning to B. Wordsworth, spends the rest of the day walking about town with him. When darkness falls, B. Wordsworth and the boy lie on their backs and gaze up at the **stars**, an experience that fills the boy with a sense of wonder about the cosmos and about his own littleness.

The boy continues spending time with B. Wordsworth and on one occasion asks him why he keeps his yard overgrown. B. Wordsworth tells him a story of a woman who died along with her unborn child and says that "the girl's husband" keeps the yard wild in memory of her. On another occasion he tells the boy that he is working on a project that involves writing a line of poetry each month and that will one day be "the greatest poem in the world." He shares a line of the poem with the boy, "The past is deep," but the boy never hears him speak of the poem again.

The boy notices B. Wordsworth growing older and upon visiting him one day sees that he is dying. B. Wordsworth tells the boy that he made up the story about the woman and child and his poetry and tells the boy not to visit again. The boy leaves, crying "for everything I saw." The boy, a year later, walks by the place where B. Wordsworth's house used to be and finds a building in its place with "brick and concrete everywhere." He wonders if B. Wordsworth ever actually existed.

CHARACTERS

The Boy (The Narrator) – The main protagonist of the story is a young boy, although it is clear that he has grown up since the events of the story. His actions and words suggest that he is somewhere between the ages of 8 and 10 at the time the story takes place. He comes from a possibly difficult background, based on the contentious relationship he seems to have with his mother and the fact he lives in an impoverished area (beggars, for example, regularly come to the house where he lives). At the same time, his curiosity about B. Wordsworth upon first meeting him and his interest in what B. Wordsworth has to say reflects his openness to the world and to others. Central to his friendship with B. Wordsworth is also his ability to experience wonder. We see this when he gazes up at the **stars** with B. Wordsworth and then when B. Wordsworth shares with him his project of writing "the greatest poem in the world." In both instances he is changed and deepened by the experience. He is also perceptive—he notices, for example, that B. Wordsworth is dying when he visits him for the last time. And he is compassionate; he weeps out of pity for his dying friend. The boy moves from innocence to experience during the course of the story. While in the beginning of the story he sees the world in a mostly fresh and innocent way, the sense of sadness B. Wordsworth communicates on occasion and the sorrow the boy experiences at the end of the story suggest a growing awareness of the more difficult realities of human existence.

B. Wordsworth – Although B. Wordsworth is associated with the beggars who come to the boy's house on a regular basis, he is soon established as an educated man with a vibrant imagination and delicate feelings. Although he makes a half-hearted effort to sell the boy a poem upon first meeting him, he is much more interested in simply observing the world around him and appreciating the beauty and wonder of this world. His interest in insects, in the **stars**, and in greenery all reflect this. His imaginative way of engaging with the world is likewise reflected in his interest in poetry. Although at the end of the story he disavows actually being a poet, his words, actions, and manner of guiding the boy into a deeper awareness of reality suggest that he is a poet in a more nuanced sense. B. Wordsworth is at the same time a man without a clearly established social identity. There is no sense of a past that attaches to him (he also disavows the story he told the boy about a wife and child who died), no sense of a clear social identity in the present, and no sense of a future. He presumably dies alone, without family or friends at his side. If he largely functions in the story as a guide who initiates the boy into a poetic way of seeing the world, he is also an ephemeral figure, so much so that the boy wonders at the end of the story if he ever actually existed.

The Boy's Mother – The boy's mother appears on two

occasions, both times near the beginning of the story. When B. Wordsworth appears in their yard and requests to watch the bees that live in the palm **trees**, she treats him with suspicion and then has the boy send him away when B. Wordsworth offers to sell them a poem. She seems to treat the boy rather roughly. The boy tells B. Wordsworth that he likes his mother when she's not beating him, and a short time later, when he comes home late from school after visiting B. Wordsworth, she does in fact beat him. Because there is no mention of a father in the story, it is possible that she is raising the boy on her own, and her actions are those of a stressed, impatient woman. The boy's friendship with B. Wordsworth may in part be due to his interest in escaping a difficult home life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In "B. Wordsworth," the titular character creatively constructs an identity for himself, effectively choosing the kind of person he wants to be. That B. Wordsworth introduces himself to the boy in the beginning of the story as "Black Wordsworth" and says he is the brother of "White Wordsworth," the 19th-century English Romantic poet, immediately suggests B. Wordsworth's interest in constructing an identity oriented around the idea of fostering a poetic relationship with the world. His self-professed identity as a brother of the great poet likewise aligns with his claim that he's writing "the greatest poem in the world," a project that, like his identity, ultimately turns out to be a fiction (if readers are to believe what he tells the boy at the end of the story). It is a fiction with a purpose, however, as it creatively informs his understanding of himself and his way of seeing the world. The identity that B. Wordsworth has constructed for himself is further reflected in the place where he lives: a one-room hut surrounded by **trees** and overgrown foliage. Even though B. Wordsworth ultimately disavows the story he told the boy about why he keeps his yard overgrown (to keep alive the memory of a deceased wife and child), the story again seems less a made-up account than an important building block—regardless of its factual accuracy—in B. Wordsworth's constructed sense of self. The ambiguities surrounding B. Wordsworth's social identity don't invalidate who he is, then, but emphasize the lesson he models for the boy: namely, that it's possible for people to actively construct their own identities, thus freeing them to be whomever or whatever they want to be.

ART AND THE ARTIST'S LIFE

B. Wordsworth introduces himself to the boy in the beginning of the story as "Black Wordsworth," the brother of "White Wordsworth," or William Wordsworth, a 19th-century English Romantic poet who believed in cultivating a meaningful and immediate relationship to the natural world. B. Wordsworth claims that he is a poet and tells the boy that he's writing one line of poetry each month with the intention of eventually creating "the greatest poem in the world." It is not clear, however, whether he has actually written more than the one line he shares with the boy, "The past is deep." While B. Wordsworth may not be a poet in the conventional sense—in his last conversation with the boy, he denies that he ever was a poet—the story implies that he *is* a poet in the more abstract sense of adopting an artist's general relationship to the surrounding world. He embraces the world (especially nature) in a spirit of creativity, wonder, and deep feeling. In this way, he really does seem to have something in common with the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who believed in appreciating natural beauty and leading an introspective life. B. Wordsworth even tells the boy that "when you're a poet you can cry for everything" and leads the boy on various excursions that seemed designed to teach the boy how to approach the world in a similar way—that is, how to engage with his surroundings on a meaningful, emotional level. The boy comments that B. Wordsworth does "everything as though he were doing it for the first time in his life." He also adds that, because of this, the world "became a most exciting place." Because of B. Wordsworth's artistic approach to life, the boy himself learns to see the world as an endless source of wonder and meaning.

UNCONVENTIONAL FRIENDSHIP

"B. Wordsworth" demonstrates the power of friendship to transcend arbitrary differences that might otherwise keep people apart. By most accounts, the young boy and B. Wordsworth have very little in common. B. Wordsworth is much older than the boy, and he speaks in a completely different style—a style that is reminiscent of a well-educated, upper-middle-class British man. The boy, on the other hand, speaks in the common dialect of Trinidad and Tobago. And yet, they get along quite well, clearly enjoying each other's company and presumably finding it rewarding to see the world through each other's eyes. In particular, B. Wordsworth teaches the boy to embrace a sense of wonder as he moves through life, and this sensibility makes the boy suddenly feel "big and great," as if his entire way of moving through the world has changed for the better. Furthermore, part of their friendship's dynamic has to do with the fact that B. Wordsworth is considerably older than the boy, meaning that their life experiences are undoubtedly different; after all, B. Wordsworth has experienced much more than the

boy. And yet, for all of these differences, nothing stands in the way of their connection. To the contrary, their bond is perhaps fueled by the fact that they each bring something different to the table. In turn, it becomes clear that their friendship is based on mutual feelings and compatible—or *complementary*—worldviews rather than on superficial identifiers related to age or class. By outlining this dynamic, the story implies that sometimes the most unconventional and unlikely relationships can prove to be the most meaningful, as long as people forge connections that are unencumbered by arbitrary social norms and expectations surrounding friendship.

THE WONDER OF NATURE

An appreciation for the wonder of a nature is central to B. Wordsworth's worldview and to his friendship with the boy. The boy meets B. Wordsworth when the latter comes to his door requesting to "watch the bees" that have taken over the palm **trees** in the boy's yard. B. Wordsworth's interest in the bees signals a crucial preoccupation for him—the wonder of the natural world. This sense of wonder is one that the boy is initially unaware of; he sees the bees as pests and, later, wonders why B. Wordsworth keeps his yard overgrown. B. Wordsworth teaches the boy, more through his actions than his words, that the natural world is a place of wonder that one ought to pay attention to. B. Wordsworth clearly sees the world of nature as something that invites—or perhaps *deserves*—awe and appreciation, as made evident by his interest in both small, everyday elements of the world (like fruit trees and bees) and cosmic beauties (like the constellations he shows the boy). The natural world is also a way of keeping alive the memory of the dead, such as when B. Wordsworth suggests that he keeps his yard overgrown in order to memorialize a deceased wife and child. The boy's strong association of B. Wordsworth with nature also comes through when the boy wonders at the end of the story—after discovering that B. Wordsworth's hut and overgrown yard have been replaced with brick and concrete—whether B. Wordsworth ever truly existed at all. Just as the lush greenery of the yard has disappeared, the boy is filled with a deep sense of B. Wordsworth's absence. In turn, the story implies that perhaps the most compelling and astonishing thing about nature is that it often feels intertwined with seemingly everything about human life, including the magic of a close personal relationship.

LIVING AND DYING

The joy of living and the sorrow of death are deeply intertwined in "B. Wordsworth." Midway through the story, the boy asks B. Wordsworth about his overgrown yard. When B. Wordsworth tells him a story that suggests that his pregnant wife and unborn daughter died, the boy comments that B. Wordsworth, as he told this story, "seemed to grow older," suggesting that this memory is a painful one for B. Wordsworth even if he keeps his yard overgrown in order to keep the memory alive. Near the end of the story, the boy visits a very sick B. Wordsworth and understands that he is dying. B. Wordsworth on this occasion disclaims the earlier story about the "boy poet and girl poet," stating that it was "just something I made up." The boy, even so, notes that he "ran home crying, like a poet, for everything I saw." Even if B. Wordsworth's story is untrue, there is a palpable sense in the story of the beauty of life and the pain of loss, where the experience of beauty compensates for the pain. Even if the boy finally wonders if B. Wordsworth ever actually existed, the question seems to arise from a deeply felt sense of the shimmering reality that B. Wordsworth embodied when he was alive and the sad vacancy of the world in his absence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TREES

The trees in the story symbolize the many life-giving qualities that B. Wordsworth himself represents. Indeed, the story begins with trees that are brimming with life—the bee-infested palm trees in the boy's front yard. A short time later, the boy visits B. Wordsworth's house to "eat mangoes" and is struck by the variety of fruit trees in his front yard. In the middle of the story, B. Wordsworth responds to the boy's question about why he keeps "all this bush" in his yard by telling a story about how the overgrown yard, trees and all, are meant to keep alive the memory of a wife and her unborn child who died. The story ends with the absence of trees as the boy passes the place where B. Wordsworth used to live and notices that the house, trees, and yard have been torn down and replaced by brick and concrete. The trees in all these instances reflect B. Wordsworth's own vital, life-giving, generative qualities as a would-be poet, qualities that he models for the boy. When the boy eats the mango from B. Wordsworth tree, for instance, the juice drips down his chin as if from an overabundance of sweetness and delight. The trees throughout the story represent an ideal in which life, joy, and creativity manage to transcend hardship and suffering. Their final absence in the story suggests a kind of defeat, one that leads the boy to question whether B. Wordsworth, so closely associated with nature, ever actually existed.

THE STARS AND THE PIN

The stars at night, which fill the boy with wonder, and an incident with a small pin both symbolize a sense of the world's deep mystery. Whether one looks up into the night sky or down into rushing water, the world is a constant source of curiosity and wonder for B. Wordsworth and the boy. A crucial moment in the story occurs when the boy and B. Wordsworth lie down on their backs and look up at the stars. The boy notes, "I had never felt so big and so great in all my life." The stars reveal to him the grandeur of the universe and the grandeur of his own being, even if they at the same time paradoxically make him feel like he is "nothing." After this, while walking with B. Wordsworth, the boy, as if inspired by B. Wordsworth's endless wonder about the world and its mysteries, wonders whether a pin that he is holding will float if he drops it in the water. "This is a strange world," says B. Wordsworth. "Drop your pin, and let us see what happens." The pin sinks, and neither say anything more about it. Although the pin sinking into the water is a small reality compared with the more majestic reality of the stars, it reflects how the friendship between the two, itself a strange union of outwardly different characteristics, is shot through with an all-encompassing sense of wonder at the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Everyman's Library edition of *Collected Short Fiction of V. S. Naipaul* published in 2011.

B. Wordsworth Quotes

His English was so good it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried.

She said to me, 'Stay here and watch him while he watch the bees.'

The man said, 'Thank you, Madam. You have done a good deed today.'

He spoke very slowly and very correctly, as though every word was costing him money.

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth, The Boy's Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

It quickly becomes clear in the story that B. Wordsworth is quite different from the "beggars" who regularly stop by the boy's house. His request, to begin with, is an unusual one. He doesn't ask for money or food but simply to watch the bees that swarm about the palm trees in the front yard. This is surprising enough, but even more surprising is the polished language he uses in making this request. Unlike the dialect used by the boy and his mother, the common dialect of the citizens of Port of Spain, B. Wordsworth speaks in the language of an educated member of a higher class. He is also well-mannered, which contrasts the rather rude manners of the boy's mother—a further indication of his class. The precision with which he uses language does create a tension of sorts, as it would seem to be in conflict with his much humbler and more mundane request to observe the bees in the yard.

'Black. Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small flower like the morning glory and cry.'

Related Characters: B. Wordsworth (speaker), The Boy (The Narrator)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

B. Wordsworth introduces himself to the boy as the Black brother of the 19th-century English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. William Wordsworth's poetry, in keeping with the values of the Romantic movement that he helped to establish, dramatized the relationship between human beings and the natural world, ultimately emphasizing the power of intuition and emotion over reason and empiricism. B. Wordsworth's self-created identity as a brother of William Wordsworth suggests his own interest in paying close attention to the world of nature—such as, in this case, the bees in the boy's front yard. The example he cites of how watching even a small flower can fill him with emotion is also telling, as a number of poems written by William Wordsworth present a heightened appreciation for the world of flowers and, more generally, the entire natural world, which he believed deserved close attention and respect.

He lived in Alberto Street in a one-roomed hut placed right in the centre of the lot. The yard seemed all green. There was the big mango tree. There was a coconut tree and there was a plum tree. The place looked wild, as though it wasn't in the city at all. You couldn't see all the big concrete houses in the street.

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator) (speaker), B. Wordsworth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

B. Wordsworth's interest in the natural world—reflected in his earlier interest in bees and in his association with the great Romantic poet William Wordsworth—is significantly reflected in the place where he lives. The one-roomed hut suggests a simple, solitary, hermit-like existence. That this hut is placed in the exact center of the yard suggests B. Wordsworth's desire to be surrounded on every side by nature. The emphasis is less on the hut as a place to live as it is on the hut as being fully integrated into the yard that surrounds it. The boy likewise notices how the yard and hut encompass a world unto themselves, one that is sharply distinct from the concrete world that surrounds it.

The yard itself, with its fruit trees and lush, overgrown greenery, suggests vitality and fecundity. It is a place where nature is allowed to take its own course, where it is allowed to thrive without human interference. The fruit trees, at the same time, are not entirely distinct from human needs but presumably serve as a source of food for B. Wordsworth. B. Wordsworth's home is a place that both mirrors his interest in the dynamic world of nature and reflects his own separation from the busy, chaotic, cold world that lies outside his home.

B. Wordsworth said, 'Now, let us lie on the grass and look up at the sky, and I want you to think how far those stars are from us.'

I did as he told me, and I saw what he meant. I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life. I forgot all my anger and all my tears and all the blows.

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is the culmination of an afternoon and evening spent walking about town, where B. Wordsworth functions as a kind of guide introducing the boy to the interesting features of the town where they live. The formal language B. Wordsworth uses in inviting the boy to look up at the sky and the instruction that that he provides reflects his role as guide. That the boy so willingly accepts his invitation and follows his instructions reflects that he is entirely comfortable in allowing B. Wordsworth to lead him.

The experience itself suggests the power of the guide-disciple relationship. The boy, for the first time in his life, experiences the wondrous nature of the cosmos and has a deep intuition at the same time of his own littleness. The experience is one of transcendence, of him being lifted out of his own limited sphere of knowledge and experience and being ushered into a world of depth and profundity. It is not only a kind of spiritual experience for the boy but a healing one as well, as it enables him to look past the hard facts of his existence and to experience the world as a place of majesty and wonder.

He said, 'Listen, and I will tell you a story. Once upon a time a boy and girl met each other and they fell in love. They loved each other so much they got married. They were both poets. He loved words. She loved grass and flowers and trees. They lived happily in a single room, and then one day the girl poet said to the boy poet, "We are going to have another poet in the family." But this poet was never born, because the girl died, and the young poet died with her, inside her. And the girl's husband was very sad, and he said he would never touch a thing in the girl's garden. And so the garden remained, and grew high and wild.'

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

As it turns out, B. Wordsworth's lush, overgrown yard is not merely a function of his interest in the natural world. His

purposes in allowing the yard to grow unchecked go much deeper. According to the story he tells the boy, he keeps the yard as he does in order to keep alive the memory of a "girl poet" and "boy poet" who died. The details of B. Wordsworth's home all neatly reflect the details of the story—the single room and the yard with its "grass and flowers and trees." The story begins on a note of great hope, as the wife announces to her husband that she is pregnant. The fecundity of the yard is matched by the apparent fertility (and creative powers) of the couple. Tragically, mother and baby die before the child is born.

There is a strong suggestion here that B. Wordsworth is talking about his own life, which would help explain the solitary life he leads, the place he lives, the condition of his yard, and the tinge of sadness that seems to be woven through his interest in worldly wonders. At the same time, he never directly claims that the wife and child were his own, thus leaving open the possibility that the story is invented, or is perhaps the story of someone else, perhaps a previous inhabit of the home. This ambiguity raises questions about B. Wordsworth's identity—that is, it raises questions about the extent to which his identity is constructed out of need and desire rather than by the formal facts of his existence.

❝ He said, 'But this is a different sort of poem. This is the greatest poem in the world.'

I whistled.

He said, 'I have been working on it for more than five years now. I will finish it in about twenty-two years from now, that is, if I keep on writing at the present rate.'

You does write a lot, then?'

He said, 'Not any more. I just write one line a month. But I make sure it is a good line.'

I asked, 'What was last month's good line?' He looked up at the sky and said, 'The past is deep.'

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Although B. Wordsworth first introduced himself to the boy as a poet, there has been little talk of his poetry up to this point, suggesting that B. Wordsworth is more a poet of experience than of the written word. Here, he claims to not only be writing a poem, but "the greatest poem in the world." B. Wordsworth's grandiose ambition would seem to go against the humbler features of his existence, such as his overgrown yard with its one-room hut and his apparent lack of interest in money or in remunerative work.

His ambition, on the other hand, squares with his generosity of spirit and his openness to life in its most wondrous, vast, and majestic aspects. His poetic project, that is, is born out of a patient desire to give witness to the world as experienced over a great length of time—27 years, as he notes, including the five years he has apparently spent working on the project. That he cites only one line of poetry for the boy, however, suggests that this project, like so much else about him, is more rooted in desire than reality. Even if the line itself, "The past is deep," has the ring of poetic truth, it feels more like a one-off than something deeply considered.

Even if B. Wordsworth's poetic project isn't real, the story he tells about it, like the earlier story he told about the wife and child, suggests his commitment to a deeper reality, one rooted in a poetic way of seeing the world and an identity constructed around the values of this poetic way of being.

❝ Our walks continued. We walked along the sea-wall at Docksite one day, and I said, 'Mr. Wordsworth, if I drop this pin in the water, you think it will float?'

He said, 'This is a strange world. Drop your pin, and let us see what will happen.'

The pin sank.

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

B. Wordsworth and the boy's travels about town allow them to experience and explore the world. Their walks also suggest a deepening of their guide-disciple relationship. Whereas earlier in the story B. Wordsworth was more directive in this role, the boy now begins to exercise his own agency in exploring the world. Here, he takes the initiative in wondering if the pin he proposes to drop into the water will float. The outcome of the experiment (it sinks) is less

interesting than the simple fact of the experiment itself, reflecting as it does the boy's interest in modeling his guide's manner of seeing and exploring the world.

On a deeper level, the experience complements the earlier one in which B. Wordsworth and the boy lay on their backs and gazed up at the night sky. In that instance, the boy was overwhelmed with a sense of the vastness of the cosmos and his own littleness. In this instance, he looks down into the depths and is intrigued by what might happen when he drops a very small pin into them. And yet, the experiment on the whole seems less metaphysical than scientific, as if the boy is trying on the role of experimenter of life in small but meaningful ways.

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking through the window at the coconut tree, and he was speaking as though I wasn't there. He said, 'When I was twenty I felt the power within myself.' Then, almost in front of my eyes, I could see his face growing older and more tired. He said, 'But that—that was a long time ago.'

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

B. Wordsworth has thus far been for the boy a source of light and life, a forward-thinking, visionary human being who has helped the boy see the world in new and interesting ways. The B. Wordsworth we see here is not that man. His demise is both physical and spiritual. The passage raises interesting questions about how the two relate to each other. It is possible that his physical decline has compromised his ability to see the world in a poetic way. Unable to fully participate in the world, he is perhaps no longer able to appreciate it for the endless source of wonder and interest that it has been for him. When he looks at the coconut tree outside his window, it is as if he is looking at a distant object, one detached from his own interests.

On the other hand, it is possible that his spiritual demise has brought about, or perhaps helped to expedite, his physical demise. His words sound a note of despair at losing the creative powers he possessed when he was young. This very reflection physically impacts him, as he seems to grow older and more tired after speaking these words. Whereas previously in the story the "deep past" seemed a source of wonder, here it seems to express a darker sense of the passage of time and the reality of human mortality.

He said, 'Good. Well, listen. That story I told you about the boy poet and the girl poet, do you remember that? That wasn't true. It was something I just made up. All this talk about poetry and the greatest poem in the world, that wasn't true, either. Isn't that the funniest thing you have heard?'

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator), B. Wordsworth (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

B. Wordsworth's confession to the boy that he fabricated his poetic identity as well as the story he told him about the deceased wife and child raise significant questions about B. Wordsworth's identity and truthfulness. If Wordsworth is now telling the truth, then readers are necessarily led to wonder why he would have told the boy these fictions. One possibility is that they have helped him to craft a workable identity based upon his interests and desires. Readers can interpret these fictions, that is, as following from his desire to lead a self-created existence as a poet of life.

It is certainly possible, at the same time, that he was telling the truth about his interests as a poet and about his wife and child and that he has his own reasons for now disavowing what he told the boy. Perhaps he is trying to protect the boy from the emotional fallout of his impending death by diminishing his own stature in the boy's eyes. The manic glee B. Wordsworth expresses after telling the boy about his fabrications might also suggest that he is not entirely in his right mind—that the reality of the past for him is cloaked in darkness and shadows and that he can't himself determine what was real.

His words, in any event, are not entirely uncharacteristic. His poetic way of seeing the world combined with his own interest in mystery and wonder have established him as a not entirely reliable narrator of his own life, even if this unreliability is in the service of a greater impulse to make the world what one desires it to be.

I walked along Alberto Street a year later, but I could find no sign of the poet's house. It hadn't vanished, just like that. It had been pulled down, and a big, two-storeyed building had taken its place. The mango tree and the plum tree and the coconut tree had all been cut down, and there was brick and concrete everywhere.

It was just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed.

Related Characters: The Boy (The Narrator) (speaker), B. Wordsworth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This final section serves as a kind of coda to the story, as the boy passes by the place where B. Wordsworth used to live a year after seeing him for the last time and discovers that his home and yard have been demolished and have been subsumed by the hard, noisy world that has always hovered around their edges. The two-story building has replaced the one-room hut, while concrete and brick have replaced the once-lush yard. Most notable in the boy's mind is the absence of the fruit trees, those emblems of life and generation that played such an important role in the boy's relationship with B. Wordsworth.

The absence of any sign that B. Wordsworth ever lived in this place prompts the boy to question whether the man even lived at all. This is in part due to the close association in the boy's mind between B. Wordsworth and his lush, hermit-like home. The erasure of one suggests the erasure of the other. But the phrase "just as though" is key. It isn't a serious question but rather a reflection on just how severe the disappearance of his home is. It may also reflect something of the boy's maturity and experience. As young as he was during the period when he was with B. Wordsworth, that time may well seem to him now as if it were steeped in a hazy world of childhood innocence—almost, indeed, as if it were a dream.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

B. WORDSWORTH

Like the several "beggars" who regularly appear at the narrator's house, a strange man comes into the yard one afternoon and asks if he might watch the bees that populate the palm **trees** in the yard. Despite his mother's skepticism, the narrator (a young boy at the time) stays with the man while he watches the bees. The man calls himself a poet and introduces himself as B. Wordsworth, claiming that the "B" stands for "Black Wordsworth" and that he and the "white Wordsworth" (that is, the famous Romantic poet William Wordsworth) are brothers who "share one heart." B. Wordsworth offers to sell his poetry, but the narrator's mother has no interest. The narrator wonders if many people buy his poems, and B. Wordsworth admits that he has yet to sell any. Once B. Wordsworth leaves, the narrator hopes to see him again.

It very quickly becomes clear that B. Wordsworth is not just another "beggar"; his real interest is in observing the unusual spectacle of the bees swarming the palm trees in the boy's front yard. The swarming bees suggest the dynamic life that he himself possesses, a vitality that is reflected in his willingness to engage the boy in conversation. A further difference between B. Wordsworth and the "beggars" is reflected in the feeble attempt he makes to sell the boy his poetry, It is his identification with the poetry itself that is most important. This identification is made clear in his self-professed name—a name that, in its reference to the great English poet, is a powerful marker of identity for him. The age difference between the two is likewise of much less interest to B. Wordsworth than simply the possibility of creating a bond based upon mutual sympathies and worldviews.

The narrator runs into B. Wordsworth a week later when returning home from school. B. Wordsworth invites the narrator to come eat mangoes from the mango tree that grows in his yard. The narrator is struck by how green B. Wordsworth's yard is and by the variety of **trees** in it. When the narrator returns home after eating a mango, his mother beats him for not coming home on time. The narrator runs away and returns to B. Wordsworth, who consoles him and takes him for a walk. When it grows dark, B. Wordsworth suggests they lie on the ground and look up at the **stars**. The narrator is overwhelmed with a sense of his own smallness and the greatness of the stars.

The friendship that begins to develop between B. Wordsworth and the boy is in part that of guide to disciple. The wonder the boy experiences upon seeing B. Wordsworth's lush yard with its fruit trees and the juicy mango the boy eats are both experiences that open him up to the richness and vitality of life. The life B. Wordsworth represents is a far cry from the narrator's cramped, abusive home life, and B. Wordsworth is both the tempter leading him out of that life and the guide initiating him into the mysteries that exist in the world outside the boy's home. B. Wordsworth introduces the boy, for example, to the grand, majestic mysteries of the cosmos, an experience that fills the boy with a sense of his smallness and the universe's greatness. The stars the boy beholds, that is, reflect a sense of transcendence; a sense of being both intensely part of and lifted out of the world that he inhabits.

The narrator and B. Wordsworth become friends. B. Wordsworth makes the narrator promise not to talk to anyone about him or his fruit **trees** and, in response to a question the narrator asks about his overgrown yard, he shares a sad story about two young poets who once fell in love, got married, and prepared to have a child—but the wife died while pregnant. After the wife died, the husband decided that he wouldn't change anything in the garden, which his wife had loved so dearly. The narrator is moved by the story. The two go for long walks together and visit various places around town. The narrator notes that B. Wordsworth does "everything as though he were doing it for the first time" and that, because of this, the world has become a "most exciting place."

B. Wordsworth's love of nature and his self-created identity as a poet are reflected in the story he tells the boy about why he keeps his yard overgrown. He tells the boy that he does so in order to keep alive the memory of a "girl poet" and her unborn baby who died—presumably the wife and child of B. Wordsworth himself. That B. Wordsworth takes care not to explicitly identify the two as his own is telling, however, and is perhaps related to the fact that he instructs the boy to not tell anyone about him or his fruit trees. Indeed, B. Wordsworth prefers to live in a semi-secret creative space that exists independently from the superficial world of material reality. He invites the boy to inhabit this space as well, which the boy willingly does. The boy thus experiences right along with B. Wordsworth the excitement and wonder of the world.

One day, B. Wordsworth shares that he is working on a project that involves writing one line of poetry a month. He claims that, when finished, it will be "the greatest poem in the world." He shares the line he wrote the previous month: "The past is deep." The narrator is "filled with wonder" when B. Wordsworth says that his poem will "sing to all humanity."

Although B. Wordsworth introduced himself to the boy in the beginning of the story as a poet and even offered to sell the boy a poem, it is only now that he speaks again of his interests as a poet. His project of writing a line of poetry each month—with the goal of creating "the greatest poem in the world"—is a grand scheme that fits with his capacious ability to appreciate the wonder and mystery of the world and of human experience. The one line of poetry that he cites for the boy, "The past is deep," suggests this broad and all-encompassing interest and likewise reflects an interest in crafting a kind of poetry that possesses deep humanistic qualities.

While out walking along the water one day, the narrator asks B. Wordsworth if he should drop a **pin** into the water to see what will happen. B. Wordsworth encourages him to do so, and the pin sinks. When the narrator questions him about his poetry, B. Wordsworth gives a dismissive reply—from this point on, he never shares lines from his in-progress poem again.

The boy has by now learned, through the modeling of B. Wordsworth, to look at the world in a spirit of wonder and curiosity. A crucial early moment in his growth was when he looked up at the enormity of the cosmos and experienced his own littleness amidst its greatness. In this instance, he looks downward and, perhaps inspired by an intuition of depth, wonders if a pin that he is holding will sink or float. Although neither the boy nor B. Wordsworth comment on the outcome of this experiment, it is presumably a cause for wonder, nonetheless. That the world is something to be experienced and not necessarily documented is suggested in B. Wordsworth's dismissive reply to the boy about his poetic project. B. Wordsworth's poetry, it seems, is a matter of life and living, not of actual writing.

The narrator notices that B. Wordsworth is growing older and asks him how he earns money. B. Wordsworth says that he sings calypsos. Later, the narrator visits B. Wordsworth and sees that he is dying. When the narrator bursts into tears, B. Wordsworth says that he will tell one last story and that the narrator must then leave and never return. B. Wordsworth says that the story he told the narrator about the pregnant poet wife who died wasn't true and that he also made up the story about writing the greatest poem in the world. B. Wordsworth pretends to find this funny, but his voice breaks as he finishes speaking. The narrator leaves the house in tears.

B. Wordsworth, who has taught the boy how to live, now presents the boy with the experience of having to confront death. The final lesson he imparts to the boy is ambiguous, however. That he disavows some of his most poignant identity markers—his grand poetic project and his reason for keeping an overgrown yard—is perhaps meant to communicate the lesson that reality is in large part a matter of one's own creation. It also calls into question B. Wordsworth's reliability as a witness of his own life, however. One can't be certain that B. Wordsworth wasn't in fact telling the truth and has his own private reasons for claiming otherwise. It is also telling that B. Wordsworth only shares these stories after telling the boy not to return; it is possible that he is in some manner trying to soften the blow of impending death. What is certain, though, is that the boy leaves the house filled with grief and perhaps confusion, a disciple who is suddenly deprived of a clear path forward.

A year later, the narrator walks past the place where B. Wordsworth's house used to be and discovers that it has been demolished. A two-story building has gone up in its place.

That it takes the boy a year to pass by B. Wordsworth's house suggests that he has been actively avoiding it. Surely, the boy could have passed B. Wordsworth's house any time during the previous year without breaking his vow to not visit again—and based upon his relationship with B. Wordsworth, one might have expected him to. The tone of detachment as he describes what he sees when he does walk past the house is likewise telling. It is as if he now thinks of his time with B. Wordsworth as something of a dream, and of B. Wordsworth as someone who may or may not have been real.

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