The Child by Tiger

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS WOLFE

Thomas Wolfe was the youngest of eight children born in Asheville, North Carolina. His father was a stone-carver and made gravestones, while his mother bought and sold houses, later becoming successful in the real estate business. Wolfe lived in what is now the Thomas Wolfe Memorial House until he went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While in college, he aspired to be a playwright and wrote many plays which he and his friends staged themselves. After receiving his bachelor's degree, he went on to Harvard to continue his playwrighting studies. His plays were so lengthy that they were never published or performed, so Wolfe decided to pursue fiction instead. Wolfe's first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, was edited by Maxwell Perkins, a prestigious editor at the time, who significantly shortened the manuscript. The novel was a combination of fiction and autobiography and included details of his family and the Asheville community at the time of his childhood. Wolfe went on to have a close and complicated relationship with Maxwell Perkins, at times blaming him for over-editing his work and other times crediting him for his literary success. Wolfe continued to write while teaching English at New York University. He died before he was 38 from miliary tuberculosis that had spread through his brain. He is regarded as one of the greatest American writers for his bold style and for pioneering autobiographical fiction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Child by Tiger" reflects the social norms of the 1930s and the racism that lingered well after the end of the American Civil War. Growing up in North Carolina, Thomas Wolfe witnessed racial segregation and the devastating effect this had on individuals and communities. Similarly, during his travels to Germany, Thomas Wolfe witnessed discrimination against Jews and noted his observations in his short story "I Have a Thing to Tell You." This story was later banned from publication in Germany. Later on, Wolfe was an inspiration to the Beat Generation, whose authors, like Jack Kerouac, investigated and influenced American culture following the World Wars.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Thomas Wolfe ranks with contemporaries such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as one of America's great writers. Like Wolfe, they depicted American culture during the 1920s and 30s in their stories and novels. Published just a year before "The Child by Tiger," Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* also grapples with the theme of racism in the South and uses a similar nonchronological writing style. Later Black authors, such as Richard Wright in the novel *Native Son* (1940) and James Baldwin in the short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1960s), explore the ongoing impact of racism, particularly mob and police violence, in American communities. Unique among his contemporaries, Wolfe combined autobiography with fiction, particularly in his novels *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. Many of his other works, like "The Child by Tiger," reflect on childhood and the influences that shape one's growing up.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Child by Tiger
- **When Written:** 1937
- **Where Written:** Asheville, North Carolina
- **When Published:** September 11, 1937
- **Literary Period:** Modernist Period
- **Genre:** Interpretive Literature
- **Setting:** Post-Civil War Southern United States
- **Climax:** Dick Prosser is killed.
- **Antagonist:** Dick Prosser, the mob
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Stone Angel. Thomas Wolfe's father had a stone angel in the window of his stone-carving shop which later became a significant emblem in *Look Homeward, Angel*. The angel was eventually sold and used as a tombstone, and there is some controversy as to which tombstone angel is the legendary "Thomas Wolfe Angel."

Biographical Drama. The 2016 film *Genius* is a biographical drama that portrays the relationship between Thomas Wolfe and his editor Maxwell Perkins. The film stars Jude Law as Wolfe and Colin Firth as Maxwell Perkins.

PLOT SUMMARY

Twenty-five years ago, the narrator and his friends Randy Shepperton, Nebraska Crane, and Augustus Potterham are throwing a football around. One of them misses the ball, and Dick Prosser, Mr. Shepperton's new hired man, comes along and catches it, tossing it back. The boys are in awe of Dick's skills and his gentleness. He can shoot **a gun** with perfect aim and has taught them how to throw a football and how to box without hurting one another. They think there is nothing Dick

Prosser cannot do.

However, the boys also fear Dick. Sometimes he comes up on them stealthily like a cat, and when they hear creaking noises at night, they think it might be him. Dick is deeply religious; he is always humming hymns, and sometimes, when he speaks, he seems to chant, muttering biblical phrases such as "Armageddon day's a comin'." After reading his Bible—the only object in his room—he emerges with eyes red from weeping. Once, Lon Everett, driving drunk, crashed into Dick's car, then punched Dick in the face, even though the accident had been his fault. Even though Dick didn't retaliate, his eyes got red and his teeth bared. Also, around the time when Dick was hired, the Sheppertons' cook, Pansy Harris, became very sulky and quit her job shortly thereafter.

Earlier on the day Pansy quits, the boys are playing in the Sheppertons' basement, and they peek inside Dick's room. They see a gun lying on the table next to the Bible. Suddenly, Dick is there, baring his teeth, and the boys are terrified. Then Dick laughs and explains that, as an Army man, he can't do without his gun. He says he wanted to surprise them on Christmas morning and teach them how to shoot the gun. He asks them to keep his secret from the other "white fokes," and they give him their word.

That night, it snows heavily. The narrator awakens suddenly when the town's alarm bell clangs. Everyone in town runs into the streets, asking what's happening. The narrator hears "it's that nigger of Shepperton's" and "they say he's killed four people." He and Randy think about the gun in Dick's room and feel guilty because they didn't tell anyone. The narrator gets in Mr. Shepperton's car with his friends, and they head towards town.

A mob of townspeople has gathered outside the hardware store. The mob gets more and more excited, and, without waiting for Cash Eager to come unlock the door, they smash the window and break inside. They grab guns and ammunition and stream out of the store in pursuit of Dick. The narrator hears the terrifying sound of howling hounds approaching the town square. He and Randy feel sick and afraid, but Nebraska Crane seems excited, and there's a savage glimmer in his eyes. The boys stay behind, but the mob sets out, following the trail the hounds are picking up from Dick's scent.

Back at the square, the narrator listens and pieces together the story of what happened. Earlier that night, Pansy Harris' husband had come home to find Dick with Pansy. They began to fight, and Dick shot Harris as he tried to run from the house. Dick grabbed Pansy, hid in the house, and waited. Policemen Willis and John Grady came to the shack looking for him, but Dick shot them both, then made his way towards town, swinging his gun left and right. John Chapman, a well-loved police officer, stationed himself behind a telephone pole and fired at Dick as he approached, missing. Dick shot and killed him, then left town.

The mob of townspeople and policemen trails Dick for several days as he hides out in the woods. Dick kills several deputies before the mob eventually corners him at the river. There, Dick drops his gun, but then he does something strange: he unlaces his boots, takes them off, and stands in his bare feet facing the mob. They shoot him through with bullets, then hang his body to a tree and empty their guns on the corpse. They take his body back to town and hang it up in the square for everyone to see, and Ben Pounders brags about having fired the first shot. The narrator and Randy feel nauseous when they see the hanging body, but Nebraska Crane is triumphant. The narrator is aware of a **darkness** he can now see in all of humanity.

A few days later, the boys go down to Dick Prosser's room with Mr. Shepperton. Mr. Shepperton picks up the Bible that still sits on Dick's table and reads from the place where Dick had been reading, "The Lord is my shepherd." Years later, the narrator thinks the poem "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night," seems much more fitting for Dick than the biblical Psalm. After the crime, the town speculates as to where Dick came from, but no one can figure it out. In the present, the narrator thinks he knows the answer: Dick came from darkness, and he is a symbol of man's "evil innocence."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Narrator – The narrator is an unnamed adult reflecting back to his boyhood 25 years ago, possibly around the age of 12, in a small, presumably southern U.S. town. He plays often with three friends, Randy Shepperton, Nebraska Crane, and Augustus Potterham. When the flashback begins, the narrator is very trusting and seeks an older man's example. He finds this in Dick Prosser, Mr. Shepperton's new hired man. Dick is very gentle towards him and his friends, treating them as an older brother would. Dick can throw a football perfectly and can fire a pistol with perfect aim, both actions which inspire awe in the narrator, and he teaches him how to box with his friends, light a fire, and other skills. At the same time, the narrator has a strong feeling of uneasiness around Dick Prosser, but at first, he cannot understand it. He continues to trust Dick even though Dick's deep religiosity strikes him as eerie, and even though Dick sometimes seems to creep up on the boys like a shadow. When the boys find Dick's **gun**, they keep its existence secret from everyone. Later on, after Dick's killing spree, the narrator feels guilty that he didn't reveal his knowledge of Dick's weapon. When Dick's maliciousness becomes evident with his crime, the narrator feels sick and afraid. He can sense **darkness** in all of humanity that he wasn't aware of before and still can't understand. When he finally sees Dick's mangled body hanging in the town square, he no longer recognizes the innocence he once trusted in Dick. Looking back on these events as an adult, the narrator is now certain that Dick came from darkness and

represents the darkness of all human beings. Throughout the story, the narrator experiences a jarring coming of age in which he changes from trusting a seemingly kind older man to distrusting the potential evil in everyone.

Dick Prosser – Dick Prosser is Mr. Shepperton's new hired man. He is described by Mr. Shepperton as "the smartest [Black person] that he'd ever known," an example of the various expressions of racism Dick encounters when he comes to live in this small town. Little is known about Dick's past except that he claims to have served in the Army. Dick impresses everyone with his skills at shooting, stacking kindling, and lighting fires, among other things. He is particularly kind and gentle towards the narrator and his friends, teaching them how to do things and caring for their safety. There is something mysterious and unsettling about Dick, however. The boys feel like he sneaks up on them, and they sense a shadow when he is nearby. Dick is also deeply religious and spends a lot of time reading his Bible—one of his only possessions—which makes his eyes red from weeping. He loves to sing hymns and sometimes chants biblical phrases that foretell apocalyptic events, unnerving the boys. Dick encounters explicit racism throughout the story, such as when Lon Everett punches him unprovoked. Up to this point, however, he conceals his rage and violence with gentleness and passivity: when the boys find his **gun**, he pretends he bought it to surprise them, and they believe him. When Dick goes on an unexpected killing spree, his skills, which were initially impressive and used for good, become means for terrorizing the whole town. Although the story implies that Dick's experiences of racism help provoke his explosion, his violence appears to be indiscriminate: he kills everyone he encounters, including Pansy Harris' husband and another Black man who simply looks out a window. After a long chase, a town mob traps Dick in the woods, where he appears to surrender just before being shot to death. The mob continues shooting his dead body and later displays his mutilated corpse in the town square. For the narrator, Dick becomes a symbol of the potential violence in all people, and years later, the narrator associates Dick with the mysterious "tyger" in the poem by William Blake, concluding that he is both dark like a tiger and innocent like a child.

Randy Shepperton – Randy is the narrator's closest friend and the son of Mr. Shepperton, Dick Prosser's employer. He is with the narrator during most of the scenes in the story and shares the narrator's major changes of perspective, first idolizing Dick and later feeling guilty for not telling anyone about the **gun.** Like the narrator, he feels nauseous and afraid when he looks at Dick's corpse.

Nebraska Crane – Nebraska Crane is one of the narrator's friends who plays ball with him when the story begins. Along with the other boys, he idolizes Dick Prosser and trusts him enough to keep his secret about the gun in the basement. However, when Dick's crime comes to light, Nebraska is excited by the angry mob, unlike his fearful friends. When he sees Dick's body hanging in the square, he is triumphant, and his eyes have a savage look in them.

Mr. Shepperton – Mr. Shepperton is Randy Shepperton's father and Dick Prosser's employer. Mr. Shepperton is very impressed with Dick's work. Later, he brings the boys and Mr. Crane into town when he hears about Dick's shooting spree. After Dick's death, he brings the boys downstairs into Dick's basement room and reads from the Bible where Dick had left off reading. When they leave, he locks the door so that no one can ever go in Dick's room again.

Pansy Harris – Pansy is Mr. Shepperton's family cook. Though known to be cheerful, she becomes very sullen when the Shepperton hire Dick Prosser and mysteriously quits her job soon after. Dick visits her the night of his shooting spree, and her husband finds them there. After the men get into a fight, Dick shoots and kills Pansy's husband.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Augustus Potterham – Augustus is a friend of the narrator's. He is playing football with the narrator, Randy Shepperton, and Nebraska Crane when the story opens. He has a reputation for being clumsy.

Lon Everett – Lon Everett is a man from town who is driving drunk and crashes into Dick Prosser's car. He punches Dick twice in the face, making his nose and lip bleed, even though the car accident was his fault.

Mrs. Shepperton – Randy Shepperton's mother.

Mr. Crane – Policeman and Nebraska Crane's father.

Old Man Suggs – Town citizen.

Mr. Potterham – Augustus Potterham's father.

Cash Eager – Owner of the hardware store that the mob break into to grab **guns.**

Will Hendershot – Town mayor.

Hugh McNair – Town citizen who tries to calm down the mob.

Pansy Harris' Husband – Pansy Harris' husband comes home to find Dick Prosser with his wife. He is the first victim of Dick's shooting spree.

Willis – One of the policemen sent to Pansy Harris's shack after Dick Prosser shoots her husband.

John Grady – Second policeman sent to Pany Harris's shack to capture Dick Prosser.

John Chapman – Chapman is the favorite on the police force, possibly "too kind to be a policeman." Dick Prosser shoots him through the heart in the town square just before fleeing town.

Doc Lavender – Deputy and member of the mob killed by Dick Prosser.

Wayne Foraker – Member of the mob killed by Dick Prosser.

Ben Pounders – Member of the mob that captured Dick Prosser. He brags in the town square that he fired the first shot when they captured Dick.

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.

VIOLENCE, DARKNESS, AND GROWING UP

In "The Child by Tiger," the young narrator and his friends are fascinated by the Sheppertons' new hired man, Dick Prosser. They look up to him as someone powerful and skilled, able to split kindling and shoot a rifle with perfect precision. They also trust him because of his gentle, patient instruction, like when he teaches them how to box without hurting each other. And yet they're often afraid of him, too: sometimes he suddenly comes upon them like a shadow, and they find his deep religiosity "dark and strange." Despite those moments when Dick seems menacing, the narrator and his friends are too young to understand the uneasy feeling they have about him. They continue to trust him, even when they find **his rifle** in the basement. When Dick unexpectedly murders six people, however, the boys are changed for good: Nebraska Crane gets swept up in the mob's savage revenge; the narrator can no longer believe he once thought Dick was gentle and innocent. Through the boys' changing view of Dick Prosser, the story suggests that part of growing up is coming to recognize the darkness of life—even the potential violence in people—in a way that children cannot.

The story first presents Dick's power and skill as impressive and wondrous to the young narrator and his friends, leading them to innocently admire and trust him. Dick treats the boys in such a way that they aspire to be like him when they're older. Dick assures them that one day they'll be able to hold a football as well as him. The boys love when Dick calls them "Mr. Crane" and "Cap'n Shepperton" because it makes them feel a sense of "mature importance and authority." On top of this, the boys are ignorant of the potential violence in everything Dick teaches them. While all the things Dick shows them—boxing, shooting, even splitting kindling— could be used for harm in a different context, the boys admire the sheer impressiveness of Dick's ability to "[put] twelve holes through a space one-inch square" with a gun. It doesn't occur to them that this skill could just as easily be used to kill a human being. While the boys are ignorant of the violence these skills could be used for, Dick also conceals their potential violence with his gentleness. It is significant that Dick never boxes with the boys and is mindful that they don't hurt one another. This restraint conceals his violent potential and naturally leads the boys to trust him.

As the story develops, several ambiguous signs point to Dick's untrustworthiness, but they are too strange for the boys to understand at first. First, the uneasy feeling the boys get around Dick seems unfounded. They think he sneaks up on them like a cat or a shadow, and they imagine it's him when they hear the house creaking at night. At this point, these superstitions have no grounding in reality, so they seem like the nightmares a typical young boy might have. Furthermore, Dick's religiosity confuses the boys. Dick gets deeply emotional over his Bible reading, and he chants biblical phrases to them which hint at his desire for social upheaval, but the boys don't understand his references. Rather than recognizing a darker potential in Dick, they are mostly just mystified by his religious faith, and their trust in him remains intact. Even the sight of the gun in Dick's basement—a clear hint of violence— is not enough to fully change their view of Dick. Dick asks them to keep the gun a secret from "the other white fokes," and they eagerly vow secrecy. The boys seem to view this as an instance of Dick trusting them with grown-up information, which makes them feel proud and honored instead of prompting them to suspect anything sinister.

In contrast, after Dick's crime, the narrator and his friends can no longer see innocence anywhere, even in themselves. First, Dick is transfigured in the narrator's eyes. When the narrator and Randy see his mangled corpse hanging in the square, they cannot believe that "once this thing had spoken to [them] gently." They call Dick "a thing" because his corpse no longer resembles a human being, much less the kind person they once trusted. The darkness Dick reveals appears in many other characters as well. Nebraska Crane expresses a newfound potential for violence. He is excited when the mob rallies its forces to hunt down Dick and is triumphant when they succeed in taking down "a big one." Dick's crime and its aftermath expose Nebraska to his society's capacity for violent, racist behavior, and they stir a similar darkness in Nebraska himself. Also, the townspeople appear changed to the narrator when they gather to gape at Dick's body. Even though they are so familiar to him, his neighbors appear to him now as "the mongrel conquerors of earth," and the narrator realizes there is something "hateful and unspeakable in the souls of men." Dick's crime has brought something to the surface that the narrator never recognized in them before. Even the narrator and Randy, although they are appalled and sickened by the crime, are no longer innocent. They confront their own guilt as if "the burden of the crime was on [their] own shoulders," because they had known about the gun in the basement and hadn't told anyone.

Even though the boys' view of Dick changes and he ceases to be innocent in their eyes, they continue to see in him something they will inevitably become. When they are young at the

beginning of the story, they look forward to when they'll be able to hold a football as well as him, and they are immeasurably proud when he draws them into his confidence. After the crime, they think of their own partial responsibility for it, and they recognize their own potential darkness as well as his. Thus their own innocence goes away along with their ability to recognize innocence in others.

EVIL AND INNOCENCE

Throughout "The Child by Tiger," the narrator witnesses innocence and evil. He believes at first that Dick Prosser is an innocent person: Dick is nice to him and his friends, teaching them things an older brother would and being careful that they never hurt one another. The narrator's opinion of Dick's goodness changes when Dick kills several people in town, but not in a straightforward way. Rather, the narrator is now aware of something dark in human life more broadly that he doesn't completely understand. This darkness is "something hateful and unspeakable in the souls of men." He sees it in everyone and not just in Dick: ordinary townspeople display unprecedented rage and violence when they seek to capture and kill Dick, and the narrator even feels his own guilt because he'd known about **the gun** Dick used to commit his crimes, but he didn't tell anyone. In this way, Dick's crime does not just change the narrator's opinion of Dick but changes his opinion of humanity as a whole. What is more, Dick becomes "a symbol of man's evil innocence" to the narrator. This oxymoron expresses the narrator's inability to categorize Dick as either innocent or evil after having seen him be both gentle and violent. Through the narrator's changing perspective on Dick, himself, and others, the story suggests that evil and innocence are not always distinguishable in life, and that, in fact, they coexist within everyone.

When the narrator first hears of Dick's crime, his view of Dick does not change straightforwardly from innocent to evil. The narrator's complicated view of Dick is evident in how he neither participates in the mob's rage and hatred towards Dick nor ignores it altogether. While the town is awake in a feverish state of alarm and rage, pursuing Dick through the square and retelling the story of his crimes, the narrator feels nausea and fear. He is unable to join in his neighbors' hatred of Dick, yet he can no longer regard Dick as a friend, either. Furthermore, his new feeling is not the result of a transformation of Dick's character but rather something new and alien that seems to have entered life as a whole. When the narrator gazes at Dick's body hanging in the square, he cannot believe that he once admired and respected the person this used to be. He remarks that "something had come into our lives we could not understand"—suggesting that Dick's crime and brutal death have unsettled his understanding of good and evil altogether.

This new darkness does not apply just to Dick but to everyone. The narrator sees Dick's evil as "something hateful and unspeakable in the souls of all men." In fact, even the narrator and his friends are not free from blame for Dick's crime. The narrator and Randy feel fearful and guilty "as if somehow the crime lay on [their] shoulders," because they had known about the gun Dick was keeping in his basement, and they hadn't told anyone. The townspeople, in a general sense, are also not blameless. While they did not do anything to enable Dick's crime, they show that they are capable of the same violence as Dick. They smash the windows of the hardware store and take guns and ammunition, and they set a pack of bloodthirsty dogs on his trail. To drive this point further home, the mob shoots Dick over 200 times, hangs him to a tree, and then puts his bloody, mangled body up for display in the town square. In so doing, they seem not to expose Dick's violence but rather their own.

The narrator struggles to put together the innocence and evil he has witnessed over the course of the story. In particular, the narrator is bewildered by his gentle memories of Dick in light of Dick's recent vengeance. When Mr. Shepperton reads aloud from the Bible Dick left behind, the narrator is baffled because the Psalm sounds so holy: "he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." The Psalm seems to represent an innocence the narrator no longer believes in. However, he is puzzled because Dick himself seemed to have believed in it, and this doesn't fit with Dick's violent actions. Contrary to what the Psalm suggests, the narrator thinks that Dick comes from an incomprehensible source of darkness. He reflects on a poem that seems to fit Dick more appropriately—a William Blake poem that asks how a frightful, menacing tiger could have been created. This unsettling poem expresses the menace that lurked in Dick and the incomprehensible darkness from which he seemed to come.

It seems that the narrator believes Dick was particularly menacing *because* he so mysteriously combined innocence and evil. The obscure place of darkness from which Dick seems to come is terrifying precisely because it is dark—within it, signs and reasons are invisible, misleading, and contradictory. The narrator is forced to recognize the paradox that Dick was both innocent and evil and that the same paradox exists within himself. In the end, he decides that Dick is both "a tiger and a child," a phrase that captures both the darkness and innocence within all human beings.

RACISM AND VIOLENCE

Racial tension is present throughout "The Child by Tiger." As a Black man, Dick Prosser is treated differently: Mr. Shepperton is especially impressed with him because he's "the smartest darky that he'd ever known," implying that Shepperton finds a Black person's intelligence unusual or surprising. More explicitly, racial prejudice is shown when Lon Everett strikes Dick savagely

without provocation. Though Dick himself doesn't speak of racism directly, he sometimes drops enigmatic hints, such as when he warns the boys that one day "[God will] put de sheep upon de right hand and de goats upon de left," hinting that segregation will not just be overcome someday, but dramatically reversed. Such statements suggest that Dick's eventual violence is a reaction to his society's racial injustice—a reaction that's been building for a long time. After his shooting spree, the town rises up against him with mob violence, hunting him, killing him, and hanging his body from a tree, gesturing to the lynchings of the post-Civil War south. Wolfe, in harking back to this history of racism in describing Dick's crimes, draws attention to the potential violence of *every* character, not just Dick. In doing so, Wolfe suggests that violence is an extreme manifestation of the harm that deeply embedded racism does to individuals and societies across racial lines.

Dick Prosser seems to have been angry about racism for a long time, and this anger apparently contributes to his eventual crime. The full potential of Dick's rage is seen when Lon Everett crashes into Dick's car and then punches him in the face, even though the accident is Lon's fault. Though he doesn't retaliate, Dick is extremely aggravated: his eyes get red and his hands twitch with rage at the sheer injustice of Lon's action. The depth of Dick's rage against racial injustice is further suggested by the mysterious biblical language he uses. Once, Dick says ominously to the boys "de day is comin' when […] [God will] put de sheep upon de right hand and de goats upon de left." Although he's not openly saying that racism infuriates him, he's heavily implying it. It seems that Dick uses this biblical phrase as an illustration of reverse segregation—something he apparently hopes for as revenge for the injustice he's received. Taking all this into account, it is not completely surprising when Dick's rage explodes in a spree of violence. Dick's crime is disproportionately atrocious to his provocations, but nonetheless, the story presents his trial with racism as constant, ongoing, and even dehumanizing.

Similarly, the crowd's response to Dick's crime is clearly the manifestation of fear and rage that have lain dormant for a long time. The townspeople's fervor for revenge is tremendous. They band together, amassing bloodthirsty hounds, breaking into the hardware store, and equipping themselves with **guns** and ammunition. When the people all rage in unison, Nebraska Crane whispers, "they mean business this time," hinting that in the past, the town has stopped short of explicit violence, but the hatred was always there. Their all-too-ready eagerness to seek revenge against Dick suggests the magnitude of the racial hatred they've been suppressing. Their explosion is so great, in fact, that they undo whatever negligible progress the town has made towards restraining racist violence. Hugh McNair, trying to placate them, shouts "this is no case for lynch law!" But the crowd shouts back, "We've waited long enough! We're going to get [Dick]," suggesting that the mob isn't interested in hearing reason. Indeed, they show every indication of wanting to lynch Dick: they hunt him with dogs, brutally murder him, and hang his body in the square for everyone to see. This shows that racism has, at best, lain dormant within their town and that the townspeople were only waiting for the opportunity to feel justified in expressing it.

In the cases of both Dick's and the mob's violence, the reaction far exceeds the bounds of what provokes it. Dick's violent rampage is an extreme reaction which doesn't aim to dismantle racism, but rather seems to uphold a kind of racial supremacy. In his strange, biblical murmurings, Dick confesses that he wants "Armageddon day:" a day when racial segregation will not just be eradicated but reversed, with Black people at the top of society. It is also significant that Dick's first murder is of another Black man. In this instance, Dick is not only at fault for being the one visiting Pansy Harris, another man's wife, but he also unleashes his unjust attack on a man who's been on the same side of racial injustice as him all along, showing how his violence has missed its initial mark. The mob shows the same excessive and off-target violence. When they capture Dick and execute him, they don't just shoot him once but 287 times, as Ben Pounders triumphantly boasts. Obviously, one shot would've been sufficient to take down the murderer, but the mob was carried away by their own violence. These instances suggest that a history of racism creates out-of-control violence in everyone alike.

Throughout the events of the story, it is difficult to identify the antagonist, and this seems intentional on the author's part. While Dick's actions are clearly atrocious, society and other individuals in the story are simultaneously exposed and charged for their crimes of racial violence. By showing the history of racism rearing its head when Dick commits his crime, Wolfe ensures that we cannot condemn Dick without condemning the people who oppressed and segregated him in the first place. Moreover, Wolfe shows how extreme violence comes out of a long history of racism. In this story, violence occurs across the lines of race, suggesting that in a racist society, *everyone* can play a role in perpetuating violence, and everyone suffers harm as a result.

SYMBOLS

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

GUNS

Guns symbolize the capacity for violence and, in particular, the narrator's changing view of Dick Prosser's violent potential. At first, the gun symbolizes what the narrator and his friends respect about Dick Prosser. Instead of suggesting Dick's potential for violence, the fact that

Dick can shoot with perfect aim signals to the boys his admirable skill—something they want to emulate. The gun even seems to indicate grace and agility: when Dick kindly demonstrates how to throw a football perfectly, it is "as if he were pointing a gun, [rifling] it in a beautiful, whizzing spiral." The narrator initially views guns as awe-inspiring because he connects them with the qualities that he admires in Dick.

When the narrator and his friends find Dick's rifle in the basement, though, guns become a symbol for what is potentially dangerous. When the narrator sees it, he describes it as "deadly in its murderous efficiency." Sitting beside a box of ammunition, the gun is unnerving because its purpose is unclear and perhaps sinister. Before, the narrator used gun imagery as an analogy for Dick's gracefulness (something that elicited the boys' admiration and trust), but now the actual gun is a blatant sign of Dick's possible untrustworthiness. The boys' view of Dick is shaken because the gun hints that, like the weapon, Dick is capable of causing death. However, still trusting Dick enough to take his word for it, the boys accept that the gun can be something wonderful—worthy of being a Christmas present, as Dick claims.

After Dick's shooting spree, however, guns become a symbol for extreme violence. In the same way that the gun lay inertly on Dick's table, only revealing its violent *potential*, Dick's violence and the violence of the entire town lay hidden until the shooting spree and its aftermath. When they hear of his crime, the mob runs to the general store, smashes the window, and grabs all the guns. The violence that surfaces is disproportionate: Dick, after enduring racist attitudes in the town, shoots not only white policemen but also Black residents, despite having no obvious motive. Likewise, the mob puts 287 bullets into Dick's body when one would have sufficed, suggesting that beyond supposed justice, the mob is carried away by racially motivated vengeance. In these instances, the violence has exceeded beyond the bounds of its target.

Ultimately, guns represent the narrator's changing perspective on Dick and humanity as a whole. Both Dick and humanity harbor potential violence in the same way that a gun does. While a gun isn't inherently violent—it can be gracefully shot at an inanimate target, and until wielded by a malicious human, it's harmless just sitting there—it can wreak horrific damage that rips communities apart. Similarly, human beings might appear innocent, but that doesn't mean they don't contain a deeply entrenched, destructive potential.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* published in 1989.

The Child by Tiger Quotes

He just lifted that little rifle in his powerful black hands as if it were a toy, without seeming to take aim, pointed it toward a strip of tin on which we had crudely marked out some bull's-eye circles, and he simply peppered the center of the bull's-eye, putting twelve holes through a space one inch square, so fast we could not even count the shots.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Randy Shepperton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is filling the reader in on Dick's character, all the things he is so good at and that he and his friends admire him for. This passage is significant because Dick is doing something suggestive of violence, but the scene is painted with admiration because of the boys' fascination with Dick. The boys are in awe of how easily Dick handles the gun, "as if it were a toy," and how nonchalantly he shoots, "without seeming to take aim." They admire the perfect precision with which he "pepper[s] the center of the bull's-eye" and the speed with which he shoots, so fast that they "could not even count the shots."

All these exceptional shooting skills should make Dick seem deadly. While the boys have never seen him direct his violence at anything besides the inanimate tin can target, his skill and confidence at shooting suggest that he could easily kill a human being if that were his intention. In this passage, it is evident how strong the boys' trust and admiration of Dick is. It is so strong that the narrator paints the unsettling image of Dick casually shooting twelve shots directly into his target in glowing terms. The boys are still very young at this point, because they are naïve about the ends toward which the skill of shooting could be put, and they simply admire how good Dick is at everything.

He never boxed with us, of course, but Randy had two sets of gloves, and Dick used to coach us while we sparred. There was something amazingly tender and watchful about him. He taught us many things—how to lead, to hook, to counter and to block—but he was careful to see that we did not hurt each other.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Randy Shepperton, Nebraska Crane

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues his reverence of Dick Prosser in this passage describing some of the things that Dick has taught him and his friends. This passage is significant because it highlights Dick's exceptional gentleness and kindness. In light of the evil acts he is soon to commit, his gentleness in this moment is truly misleading. He seems to genuinely enjoy teaching the boys the things that they want to learn, and he is attentive, patient, and tender. He is helping them, as an older brother might, learn a sport that is fun for boys and is making sure all the while that they do not get hurt.

However, boxing is something that involves violence, even though it is moderated and done in sport. This passage helps to point out that all the things Dick is remarkably good at involve this kind of potential violence. Shooting, boxing, and even lighting fires and splitting kindling (Dick's other specialties) all make use of potentially lethal skills. Dick's vast knowledge of all things violent starts to seem conspicuous here, even though the boys do not yet recognize it.

It is also significant that this passage points out that Dick "never boxed with us, of course." The "of course" is mysterious, because it does not seem immediately obvious why Dick never spars with the boys. Either it is because he is so much larger and stronger than them that he would be liable to hurt them if he joined in, or it is because he is Black and they are white, and that kind of fraternization was never seen during this time in history. Either way, Dick's distance from them in this moment accentuates their view of him as both a mysterious stranger and a beloved idol.

> There was nothing that he did not know. We were all so proud of him. Mr. Shepperton himself declared that Dick was the best man he'd ever had, the smartest darkey that he'd ever known.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Mr. Shepperton

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator concludes his praise of Dick in this passage by declaring how pleased everyone in town is with Dick. This passage is significant because it reveals the implicit racism that lurks in everyone's admiration of Dick Prosser. Mr. Shepperton is so impressed by Dick because he thinks it is rare and surprising that a Black man could be so capable and upstanding. This shows that the wonder Dick inspires in everyone is due—at least in part—to the fact that they view his qualities as anomalies in a Black person. In this light, all affection for and admiration of Dick belies a deeply embedded prejudice. When the narrator says, "we were all so proud of him," he is expressing the deeply ingrained opinion that many white people hold in a racist society: that they are superior to Black people and are therefore the ones who judge the Black person's worth.

This passage starts to substantiate what racism is like from Dick's perspective. When he is not being treated with open racism and hatred, he is being subtly undermined by flattery for being such a supposedly exceptional person. This passage helps to bring out the fact that Dick is treated differently by everyone, something that might contribute to his later violence.

> He went too softly, at too swift a pace. He was there upon you sometimes like a cat. Looking before us, sometimes, seeing nothing but the world before us, suddenly we felt a shadow at our backs and, looking up, would find that Dick was there. And there was something moving in the night. We never saw him come or go. Sometimes we would waken, startled, and feel that we had heard a board creak, the soft clicking of a latch, a shadow passing swiftly. All was still.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has finished explaining Dick's gentleness and impressive skills and admits for the first time that there is something unsettling about Dick. The narrator's perplexed and haunted tone of voice is especially notable. The narrator sounds as mistrustful of himself and his intuitions as he is of Dick in this passage, because he can't point out actual *evidence* of Dick's sinister side; it is simply a dark feeling.

In the same way that the boys idolize Dick's good qualities and chalk them up to more than they are, it seems at first that they are doing the same thing with their fears: they appear mostly imaginary. The boys are uneasy around Dick as if he were supernatural: they think he is "something moving in the night" and that he pounces on them "like a cat." There isn't any real evidence of Dick's ominousness, so the reader thinks the young boys might be inventing things.

The boys' suspicion is further undermined by its focus on darkness. They view Dick as a night dweller and a shadow. The reader has already seen that the fact that Dick is Black causes him to be treated differently—even with hostility—by the people in the town, and so it seems that the boys are playing into this same prejudice. Their uneasiness around Dick seems like it could have more to do with his physical darkness rather than any interior quality, and so the boys' suspicion reads here like racial prejudice.

> "Oh, young white fokes," he would begin, moaning gently, "de dry bones in de valley. I tell you, white fokes, de day is comin' when He's comin' on dis earth again to sit in judgment. He'll put the sheep upon de right hand and de goats upon de left. Oh, white fokes, white fokes, de Armageddon day's a comin'[.]"

Related Characters: Dick Prosser (speaker), Narrator, Randy Shepperton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dick is mumbling biblical passages to the boys that confuse and frighten them. What Dick is saying is not explicit or literal; his enigmatic images need to be interpreted. The image Dick presents of "the sheep upon de right hand and de goats upon de left," originates from Jesus's warnings about the last days in the Gospels, but it's also suggestive of racial segregation. What is more, Dick seems to be thinking about a day in the future when this separation of human beings by race will be put in place. This suggests that he wants society to be dramatically rearranged, perhaps reversing the status of blacks and whites. He also hints at "Armageddon day," which means a day of reckoning or the end of the world as it stands.

In this instance, the reader can interpret what Dick means, whereas the boys, being so young, cannot. The reader starts to acknowledge something sinister about Dick, and his potential for violence, that no longer fits into the boys' innocent view of him. At this point in the story, the boys are clearly deceived in their innocent trust of Dick, and the reader realizes that their admiration and affection towards him is setting them up for a huge disillusionment that's coming.

> Dick did not move. But suddenly the whites of his eyes were shot with red, his bleeding lips bared for a moment over the white ivory of his teeth. Lon smashed at him again. The Negro took it full in the face again; his hands twitched slightly, but he did not move. [...] No more now, but there were those who saw it who remembered later how the eyes went red.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Lon Everett

Related Themes:

Page Number: 335

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lon Everett, driving drunk, has just crashed into Dick's car. Even though the accident was entirely Lon's fault, Lon proceeded to jump out of his car, stagger over to Dick, and punch him twice in the face, making him bleed. This passage reveals two things: evidence of explicit and violent racism that Dick receives, and the intense rage that this provokes in him. Until this point in the story, Dick is portrayed as an accepted and respected member of the community. Besides the fact that Dick is treated as if his intelligence and skill are remarkably unusual for a Black man, the reader has not yet seen him face outright racial hatred. This scene, in which Dick is clearly attacked for no other reason than his race, helps to establish Dick as someone who would understandably be seeking justice for himself.

That being said, Dick's anger at the scene is of a frightening degree. It transforms him into a demonic figure of rage, making his eyes actually turn red and making his hands twitch uncontrollably. The narrator explains that those in the town who saw how Dick reacted when Lon hit him were shaken and never forgot it. This passage therefore illustrates that Dick has been unjustly provoked to the point that his rage is justified. But it also illustrates rage as an alarming, terrifying power that's ready to explode.

> See it! My eyes were glued upon it. Squarely across the bare board table, blue-dull, deadly in its murderous efficiency, lay a modern repeating rifle. Beside it lay a box containing one hundred rounds of ammunition, and behind it, squarely in the center, face downward on the table, was the familiar cover of Dick's worn old Bible.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Randy Shepperton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 336

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator and his friends peek inside Dick's open bedroom door and see the new gun he has sitting on the table. This passage is significant because it illustrates the moment when the gun becomes a sign for Dick's potential violence. Up until this point, guns had been used in a harmless way in the story: Dick demonstrates his perfect shooting skills with Randy's gun on a target. The rifle in Dick's basement, however, is clearly for a different purpose. It sits, ready to be activated, beside a huge box of ammunition. The boys' trust of Dick is shaken when they see the gun sitting "deadly in its murderous efficiency"; they now have a glimpse of what Dick might be capable of, in the same way that they now know what fears a real, ready-to-be-loaded gun can evoke.

Going forward in the story, guns become a symbol of the violence that potentially exists in everyone. In the same way that a gun is harmless before it has been loaded, the townspeople do not reveal their violence until Dick's crime activates it.

> He looked at me and whispered, "It's Dick!" And in a moment, "They say he's killed four people." "With— " I couldn't finish. Randy nodded dumbly, and we both stared there for a minute, aware now of the murderous significance of the secret we had kept, with a sudden sense of guilt and fear, as if somehow the crime lay on our shoulders.

Related Characters: Randy Shepperton, Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 338

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator and Randy Shepperton find out that Dick is the culprit and that he supposedly used the gun they knew about to kill four people. This passage is significant because the first thing that Randy and the narrator feel is their own partial responsibility for the crime. They realize at the same time how naïve they were to have trusted Dick and kept the secret about his gun.

This is a turning point in the narrator and Randy's development over the course of the story. Not only is their view of Dick changed forever, but they also have to confront the fact that their faith in Dick, in a small way, led to his crime. This ultimately leads to the feeling that it will be impossible to trust or admire Dick or believe in gentleness ever again, because they now know how deceptive apparent innocence can be. Furthermore, because Dick's deceptive trustworthiness led them into guilt themselves, corrupting their innocence, it is understandable that the narrator is now disposed to see only potential darkness in the world around him. In other words, the boys' own guilt is an important step in their developing view of humanity's darkness as a whole.

> "This is no time for mob law! This is no case for lynch law! This is a time for law and order! Wait till the sheriff swears you in! Wait until Cash Eager comes! Wait— "

He got no further. "Wait, hell!" cried someone. "We've waited long enough! We're going to get that nigger!"

The mob took up the cry. The whole crowd was writhing angrily now, like a tormented snake.

Related Characters: Hugh McNair, Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 340

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hugh McNair, a town citizen, attempts to calm down the tumultuous mob of people who seem to want to turn to vigilante justice in their revenge against Dick. Hugh's exclamation that "this is no case for lynch law," though it's an attempt to restrain the mob, is also chilling

because it suggests that lynchings of Black citizens aren't unheard of—that there are cases in which lynch law *is* seen as acceptable. Hugh also declares that it is no time for mob law, seeming to understand that, when the town bands together in a mob, their violence and ferocity become irrational and dangerous.

In this passage, Hugh's efforts go unrewarded. The mob retorts that "[they've] waited long enough," suggesting that violent racism has been seething under the surface all this time. In fact, violence bursts forth more ferociously than the crime at hand warrants. The mob is described as a writhing "tormented snake," as something both wicked and deeply aggravated. It seems as if they were waiting for an opportunity (a Black man doing something criminal) which would allow them to express their suppressed racism under the guise of justice.

❝ Dick Prosser appeared in the doorway of the shack, deliberately took aim with his rifle, and shot the fleeing Negro squarely through the back of the head. Harris dropped forward on his face into the snow. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Pansy Harris' Husband

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 342

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dick commits his first murder. After a tense altercation with Pansy Harris's husband, who came home to find Dick with his wife, Dick shoots Harris through the back of the head as he's fleeing away. This passage is significant because it shows that Dick's anger, although it is justified because of the racism he constantly faces, has gotten off-target by the time he can no longer contain it. First of all, Dick does not lash out at someone who has wronged him. In fact, Dick himself is in the wrong in this situation because he is the one visiting another man's wife. When he murders Pansy's husband, he is unleashing his suppressed anger on a person who has done him no wrong.

Furthermore, it is significant that Pansy's husband is a Black man. He is not even an enemy of Dick's in the sense that he doesn't represent the group of people who have oppressed and segregated him. All this shows that Dick's deeply embedded rage is so intense that it erupts in excessive violence that goes beyond the bounds of what initially provoked it. Moreover, this shows that racism has devastating effects on whole communities; it leads to violence that is excessive, unwarranted, and uncontrollable.

❝ The men on horseback reached him first. They rode up around him and discharged their guns into him. He fell forward in the snow, riddled with bullets. The men dismounted, turned him over on his back, and all the other men came in and riddled him. They took his lifeless body, put a rope around his neck, and hung him to a tree. Then the mob exhausted all their ammunition on the riddled carcass.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 345

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the mob of policemen and angry townspeople captures Dick and proceeds to kill him in an unnecessarily gruesome way. This passage is significant because it shows that the mob is not just seeking justice for the crime at hand; they obviously are expressing rage and hatred that has been suppressed and brewing in them for a long time.

This passage clearly gestures to the barbaric lynchings of the post-Civil War south. For years following the Civil War, mobs would hunt Black people and subject them to extrajudicial (without lawful cause) punishment in the form of hanging, dragging, unleashing dogs, and many other brutal methods. In this scene, the mob does far more to Dick than what is necessary to seek justice for his crimes. What is more, they do so outside the wishes of the townsman who had tried to stop them, telling them this was no case for lynch law. The mob puts on an outrageous performance of violence against Dick which in these very specific ways calls up the entire history of racism and exposes its brutality. In this way, the author condemns the entire history of racism that has led to such eruptions of violence.

> We saw it, tried wretchedly to make ourselves believe that once this thing had spoken to us gently, had been partner to our confidence, object of our affection and respect. And we were sick with nausea and fear, for something had come into our lives we could not understand.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Randy Shepperton, Dick Prosser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 345

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator and his friends are standing in front of Dick's dead body that the mob has hung up in the town square, trying to understand how they feel. The narrator and his friends can no longer believe that they had once been convinced of Dick's innocence. Their inability to even be able to recall their admiration of him indicates that their childhood has ended—an innocent outlook on life is now impossible for them.

Dick's body is riddled with bullets and disfigured to the point that the boys call it "a thing." They cannot identify this sight with a human being, and certainly not with a human being who had been gentle and someone they could trust. In general, their entire view of humanity has been disfigured so that notions of gentleness and innocence become foreign to them. When the narrator says that something has entered their lives "[they] could not understand," he seems to be acknowledging the loss of a time when he and his friends could make simple sense of life by respecting those who were admirable and trusting those who were gentle. From this point on, however, they will have to contend with an ever-present darkness that seems to come from some incomprehensible place and transforms the people they "knew" into unrecognizable forms.

> For we would still remember the old dark doubt and loathing of our kind, of something hateful and unspeakable in the souls of men.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is reflecting on the significance of Dick's crime and its aftermath, and the effect it will have on him and everyone forever. This passage is significant because the narrator is attributing the sense of darkness he gets from Dick's violent rampage to all of humanity, not just to Dick. The sheer rage and malice that Dick's crime aroused in others makes it impossible for the narrator not to see that violence is something that exists potentially in everyone. The town rises up with unprecedented hatred and kills Dick in an unnecessarily brutal way, mangling his body with gunshots and hanging him up in the town like a victory flag; Nebraska Crane is excited by the mob's violent revenge and savagely champions their success; even the narrator himself feels his own guilt for having kept the secret of Dick's weapon. All in all, he sees evidence of this "something hateful and unspeakable" in everyone.

As it is described in this passage, this dark and hateful potential for violence unifies everyone. Throughout the story, violence towards others is an extreme manifestation of the antagonisms created in the town by racism. However, in the narrator's interpretation of the events, he talks of the "hateful and unspeakable" violence in "all men." Ironically, the narrator's interpretation sounds like a statement of man's equality—an equality based on everyone's equal potential for being divisive and violent. This serves to prove Wolfe's point that racism is sustained by violence on all sides.

> "Yeah— we!" he grunted. "We killed a big one! We— we killed a ba'r, we did! . . . Come on, boys," he said gruffly. "Let's be on our way!"

And, fearless and unshaken, untouched by any terror or any doubt, he moved away. And two white-faced nauseated boys went with him.

Related Characters: Nebraska Crane, Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser, Randy Shepperton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator and his friends have gone to the town square where the whole town has gathered to gape at Dick's dead, mangled body. This passage reveals the dark turn towards violence that occurs in Nebraska Crane with Dick's crime and the resulting outburst of the mob's violence. In the beginning of the story, Nebraska admired

and respected Dick as much as the other boys did, but, by the end, he has fully embraced the dark spirit of violence that has been unleashed everywhere by Dick's crime. This shows firstly how impressionable the young boys are. They are deeply impressed by Dick's gentleness and talent, and later are just as affected by his wickedness and violence. Nebraska Crane is affected to the point of emulating this violence himself.

Nebraska Crane's development throughout the story is an example of how damaging violence can be, in extreme cases transforming the viewer into a violent and savage person themselves. His gruff behavior, "untouched by any terror or doubt," helps the narrator realize that Dick was only a catalyst for a universal darkness that has welled in the souls of everyone around him. While Dick is the story's clear antagonist, it is a significant part of the story's development that he uncovers antagonistic qualities in many other characters, too.

> A symbol of man's evil innocence, and the token of his mystery, a projection of his own unfathomed quality, a friend, a brother, and a mortal enemy, an unknown demon, two worlds together— a tiger and a child.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Dick Prosser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before this passage, the town speculates as to where Dick came from, but they can't figure it out. The narrator, on the other hand, knows that Dick came from darkness. This enigmatic final statement expresses how much Dick's crime and its violent aftermath distorted the narrator's notions of good and evil. He puts together the words "innocent" and "evil" into one oxymoronic description of Dick and all of humanity. His memories of Dick's gentleness alongside his knowledge of Dick's violence leave him perplexed.

When he hears Mr. Shepperton read the Psalm from Dick's Bible shortly after Dick's execution, the narrator doesn't know what to make of it; much later, he thinks the William Blake poem, "tyger tyger, burning bright," is much more fitting. In the end, he admits that Dick was somehow these "two worlds together—a tiger and a child." The passage seems to suggest that Dick and humanity are all the more sinister for combining innocence and evil, so that one never really knows who they are or what they are capable of. This final line of the story paints humanity as deceiving, mysterious, and morally confused. In a way, it seems that the narrator is talking about himself, too. He tries to remember his childhood before Dick's crime, and the innocence is now doubtful, plagued in retrospect by the constant shadow of darkness. He himself is this strange combination of good and evil, and his memories are similarly hard to categorize.

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.

THE CHILD BY TIGER

"Twenty-five years ago," the narrator is kicking around a football with his friends, Randy Shepperton, Nebraska Crane, and Augustus Potterham in Randy's yard after school. It is late October, and the narrator can smell leaves and a burning in the air. Nebraska kicks the ball and the narrator tries to catch it, but it bounces into the street. The narrator runs after it but before he can get it, Dick Prosser, "Shepperton's new Negro man," appears and scoops up the ball, tossing it back to them. He comes up and addresses all the boys as "Mister" and "Cap'n," which makes them feel proud and important.

The story's setting 25 years earlier gives the impression that the narrator looks back on this time as especially significant and formative in his life. The passage also opens the story with a sense of carefree, youthful innocence. Dick Prosser's friendly appearance also establishes him as someone the boys look up to and whose approval they seek.

Dick Prosser had served in the United States Army and "the stamp of the military man was evident in everything he did." It was a joy to watch him cut kindling because he was so powerful, cutting each piece exactly the same length and stacking it neatly against the shed. His room in the Sheppertons' basement is spotless, with only a woodstove, bed, table and chair. On his table is a Bible because he is a very religious man. The Sheppertons are very happy with him, and it seems "there was very little that Dick Prosser could not do."

The narrator thinks Dick is a wonder, performing tasks gracefully and living a disciplined, spartan lifestyle he's never seen anyone else live. In his description of Dick, there is a combination of power and restraint. Dick cuts kindling "powerfully," but stacks it so neatly and precisely, and, in contrast to his larger-than-life presence, his room is neat and undecorated. This power that expresses itself gently and restrainedly fascinates the narrator.

Once, Dick Prosser demonstrated to the boys what a good shot he was. He took Randy's .22 **gun** in his "powerful black hands" and sent twelve shots into the center of the bullseye without even seeming to aim. He also taught the boys how to box. He never boxed with them, but he would coach them while they sparred each other, and he always made sure they didn't hurt each other.

Dick's ease and talent with the gun is potentially alarming, considering that the skill could be used to kill a human being. Even his boxing talent is noteworthy—it seems that everything Dick's good at indirectly involves violence. Significantly, though, Dick never boxes with the boys. Also, he only demonstrates his power with the gun on a tin target. In this way, he again restrains his power and keeps the boys from realizing its full potential.

When Dick comes up to them, Randy asks if he's holding the ball right. Dick watches him and nods approvingly. Then he takes the ball in his own big hand "as easily as if it were an apple," and adds that, when the boys are older and their hands are bigger, they will have a better grip. Then he draws back the ball, aims it as if he is aiming a **gun**, and throws it in a beautiful spiral back to Augustus. Dick has taught the boys many things—how to light a fire, how to lift a heavy weight over one's shoulder—and they are in awe of his power and gentleness.

In this passage, the boys clearly aspire to be like Dick when they are older. When Dick throws the football, the narrator describes his motions as if he were handling a gun. This shows how enamored the boys are of Dick at this stage in the story: they attach shooting motions with gracefulness, not violence. They think Dick's ability to handle deadly things with grace is awe-inspiring; they aren't wary of the fact that Dick's action here makes them think of a weapon.

And yet, there is something sneaky and swift about Dick Prosser. Sometimes he would sneak suddenly upon the boys like a cat, and sometimes they had the impression of a shadow coming down on them when he was there. They woke sometimes thinking something moved in the night or that they heard a creak or a door opening.

Despite their admiration, the boys harbor fears about Dick. In a similar way that they idolize Dick because of their youth and innocence, they also see him as the embodiment of their childish fears.

Sometimes Dick would come from the basement with his eyes red from weeping and the boys would know he'd been reading his Bible. His voice would sometimes end in a soft moan, calling them "young white gent'mun" and telling them "you gotta love each othah like a brothah." It was like a "hymnal chant" that came from some deep, strange place in him, and it troubles and confuses the boys. They sense something dark and strange in these moments that they don't understand.

The boys don't understand Dick's deep religiosity, especially the sorrow and yearning it appears to contain. Dick's troubling language creates suspense; at this point, the reader is not sure whether to give credit to the boys' uneasiness about him, given that they're so young.

Sometimes Dick mixed together biblical phrases in perplexing speeches. He'd say "Armageddon day's a-coming," and "He'll put de sheep upon de right hand and de goats upon de left." They always heard him singing while he worked, his voice "full of Africa," but also familiar to them. Perhaps he learned the songs from his Army days. He would drive the Sheppertons to church and wait in the car in his suit during the sermon. Then, when the hymns were sung, he would stand and sometimes join in quietly.

In this passage, the reader can perceive a danger the boys can't see so clearly. Dick's biblical mutterings are extremely cryptic, but the reader can pick up some ominous clues from them. Dick's language of segregating the goats and the sheep (alluding to one of Jesus's final warnings about the end times) and reference to "Armageddon" speak to some looming catastrophe. In particular, Dick's words hint obliquely at the racial tension he constantly faces, and though the boys seem mostly oblivious to this, even they perceive something in Dick that's foreign to them—his voice "full of Africa."


Once, Dick was driving Mr. Shepperton into town when a local drunkard, Lon Everett, came skidding around the corner and knocked the fender off their car. Dick made sure Mr. Shepperton wasn't hurt. Lon stumbled over to Dick and struck him in the face, making his nose and lips bleed. Dick didn't move, but his eyes got suddenly red, and he bared his teeth. Lon punched him again, but again Dick didn't move, only his hands twitched. Nothing more happened, but many people remember how his eyes turned red.

This passage reveals the extent of the racism that exists in the town and the rage this stirs in Dick. Lon, who was at fault for the accident, had no reason for striking Dick and clearly does so out of racial hatred. In the face of this injustice, Dick becomes terrifyingly enraged. Once again, he restrains his rage, but many people are haunted by its intensity. The passage hints that Dick's suppressed rage is close to exploding.

The Sheppertons have "a comely Negro wench," Pansy Harris, as their cook. Although no one knows why, she became silent and sullen when Dick started working for them. An air of gloom follows her. One Saturday, shortly before Christmas, she announces she's quitting, offering an excuse about her husband needing her at home. The Sheppertons offer to pay her more to persuade her to stay, but she refuses and leaves that night. No one understands why.

The narrator thinks that Pansy's mysterious change of mood and decision to quit has something to do with Dick. This passage is important in terms of the story's timeline. Pansy quits the evening after the boys find something ominous in Dick's basement room, as the narrator is about to tell. Thus the passage heightens suspense about Dick and what he's capable of.

Earlier that day, the boys are playing around in the Sheppertons' basement. They notice that Dick Prosser's door is slightly open, and they peek inside. They gasp—beside Dick's Bible on the table lies a **rifle** and a box of a hundred rounds of ammunition. Suddenly, Dick appears behind them "like a cat" and a "shadow." His eyes are red, and he bares his teeth. The boys are terrified, and Randy almost begins to cry.

In this passage, all the things that are potentially suspicious about Dick become more so. The symbolism of a gun changes when the boys see the rifle, clearly intended for some lethal purpose because it is sitting beside a box of ammunition. Moreover, when Dick finds them, his rage is undeniable, and the boys' fears about his sneakiness no longer seem unfounded.

Dick closes his mouth, and his eyes turn white again. He asks the boys if they've been looking at his rifle, and they nod, shocked and awed. Dick chuckles and explains that he can't do without his rifle because he's an army man and taking his rifle away would be like "takin' candy from a little baby." He picks up the gun "affectionately," then explains that he'd saved up to buy the rifle to surprise the boys on Christmas and teach them to shoot. The boys start to calm down. Dicks says they spoiled his surprise by peeking in his room, but asks them, in a tone of confidence and sheepish regret, to keep it secret from "the other white fokes" because he was really looking forward to surprising them on Christmas Day. The boys solemnly swear to keep his secret.

The gun is a clear hint of Dick's potential for violence. The boys' trust of him is seriously shaken for the first time, and they become afraid of him. However, Dick persuades them to trust him again by using their youthful gullibility to his advantage. He transforms the boys' image of a gun back into something wonderful—something he wanted to generously surprise them with for Christmas. When he asks them to keep his secret, he makes them feel like he's trusting them with important, grown-up information, and they eagerly jump at this opportunity to be included in his confidence.

That night, snow falls. It obscures the air and covers the ground, muffling all sounds. All life retreats into the houses in which fires crackle. The narrator falls asleep sensing the mystery of the storm and feeling a dark excitement in himself. He awakens to the sound of the fire bell clanging fast and loud. Running to the window, he looks for the glow of fire but sees nothing. Then he realizes that it isn't a fire alarm but something new, signaling a menace "greater than fire or flood could ever be."

When the alarm bell rings, the narrator thinks it is some kind of natural disaster. The narrator quickly realizes, however, that this alarm warns of some new and terrible menace. This heightens the fear in this climactic moment, preparing the narrator for something horrific that he can't even conceive of.

The whole town comes to life. The houses light up and people run into the street, shouting and asking questions. Nebraska Crane comes down the street, whistling through his fingers to signal to the narrator and Randy. When the narrator meets him at the door, he notices Nebraska's eyes have a dark intensity he's never seen before. Nebraska says "it's that nigger. He's gone crazy and is running wild." Mr. Crane (the policeman) comes out and talks to Mr. Shepperton in a low voice, then Mr. Shepperton goes back inside to answer the ringing phone. His wife asks, "is it Dick?" and Mr. Shepperton nods.

Throughout this chaotic scene, the narrator still has no idea what's happening, but he glimpses the beginnings of dark change in the familiar things around him. Nebraska Crane's eyes have a dark look in them that the narrator has never seen before, and Nebraska's use of a racial slur tellingly distances himself from Dick, a man he'd admired until very recently. The narrator hears a few mentions of Dick and the dark truth of what happened draws closer to him.

Nebraska whistles again and Randy runs out and joins him and the narrator in the street. Randy whispers "its's Dick [...] they say he's killed four people." The narrator begins to ask "with—" but stops. Randy nods and they stare blankly, feeling guilty and afraid.

Significantly, the narrator and Randy's first feeling when they hear of Dick's crime is of their own guilt. They must confront the fact that they are not innocent at the very same time they find out that Dick isn't innocent, because they'd known about his gun but didn't tell anyone.

A window opens and Old Man Suggs appears, shouting that Dick is coming this way. Mr. Crane yells back that no, he went down South Dean Street, heading for the river. All around, everyone is starting their cars. When Mr. Shepperton starts his car, the boys get in, too, even though he tells them not to. They pick up Mr. Crane and head for town at top speed. Someone shouts, "he's killed six men!"

Everyone gravitates towards the town square for no apparent reason, ominously hinting that a mob is forming. Everyone is interested in the crime, but no one knows what actually happened. The narrator, too, follows Mr. Shepperton and his friends towards the town center without thinking about it; he's still in shock, and it remains to be seen whether he'll be swept along with the mob or not.

Soon, they reach the town square. Mr. Crane gets out and heads across the square without saying a word. As people rush to the square from all sides, their dark silhouettes stand out against the snow. The crowd gathered at the intersection between South Dean Street and the square looks like a dog fight. People swarm in like they do when two kids fight on the playground at recess.

The narrator's description of the gathering in the town square has animalistic overtones, as people instinctively gravitate toward violence. The dark silhouettes against the snow also suggest a contrast between innocence and evil. Instead of individual characters, everyone is increasingly grouped together as the "crowd" or the "mob." Even though the narrator has found out that Dick has committed some horrible crime, he seems most frightened by the mob at this point.

But the narrator hears something different. He hears a low, growing growl from the crowd. He knows exactly what it means, for "there's no mistaking the blood note in that foggy growl." The boys look at one another questioningly, except that Nebraska's eyes shine with a savagery the other two have never seen. He urges them towards the crowd, saying "they mean business this time." Then the boys hear the growls of the hounds getting closer, seeming to bay on their heels. In the dogs' sorrowful howls, the narrator hears "the savagery of man's guilty doom."

The growls of the savage dogs joining the mob really terrifies the narrator. Everything around him seems to have turned dark and savage. When he says he can hear "the savagery of man's guilty doom" in the dogs' growls, he seems to be referring to the savagery of all people, his own guilt, and a doom that awaits Dick specifically but also all of humanity.

The crowd gathers around Cash Eager's hardware store, even though Cash hasn't arrived yet. A few people stretch their arms across the store-front window, trying to protect the property from the crowd. Hugh McNair shouts passionately at the crowd to wait, saying this is "no case for lynch law," but the mob tries to silence him with their roar; someone says they've waited long enough. The mob writhes "like a tormented snake." Then someone throws a rock and smashes the storefront window.

Hugh McNair's exclamation that this is "no case for lynch law" indicates that there's some will to resist mob violence in the town, but it also suggests that even relatively level-headed townspeople believe that "lynch law" is sometimes justifiable. The crowd's response confirms that racism in the town has, at best, lain dormant, and it's now overflowing. Again, animalistic imagery—the "tormented snake"—illustrates how irrational the crowd is getting.

The crowd lets out a bloody roar and surges through the broken window into the store. They grab **rifles** and break open boxes of cartridges, filling their pockets with them. In minutes, every rifle and all ammunition has been taken from the store. The crowd surges back onto the street and gathers around the dogs.

This passage helps to establish the townspeople as just as capable of violence as Dick. The frightening image of the rifle and box of ammunition in Dick's basement returns here, multiplied. Dick's crime with his rifle unleashed the town's desire for loaded weapons of their own—and the town is capable of far greater firepower than a lone man.

The hounds are pulling at their leashes and moaning. Though they've detected Dick's scent, it's hardly necessary, because Dick's footprints in the snow show exactly where he went, downhill into the dark. Soon, however, the footprints are covered up by the snow blowing in the wind. Then the dogs are signaled, and they start down the hill, the crowd following them. The boys stand and watch, listening to the murmur of the crowd waft back to them. Others stand back, looking at the wreck the mob left behind. Someone points out two bullet holes in a telephone post. Between the groups of people, the pieces of the story are put together.

It seems that the author deliberately gives details of the mob's reactionary violence before *he fills in the details of Dick's crime. In doing this, he highlights the fact that the town's outrage is excessive and uncontrolled. Their violence clearly comes from a place of racial hatred that is much deeper and older than the crime at hand. The author thus condemns the mob's criminality as much as Dick's, exposing the part every character is capable of playing in violence and racism.*

As people reconstruct the details, earlier that night, Dick Prosser goes to the Black neighborhood in town to see Pansy Harris. (Some people say he was drunk.) Around ten o'clock, Pansy's husband comes home and finds Dick there. In ugly moods, the men drink and talk for a while before beginning to fight. Pansy's husband slashes Dick with a razor, and Pansy runs out of the house screaming for help. After informing the police, Pansy returns to her shack just as her husband staggers out, bleeding. Dick appears in the doorway and shoots Pansy's husband in the back of the head. He drops to the ground and lies dead in the snow. Then Dick grabs Pansy, pulls her inside, locks the door, and waits in the dark.

When the reader finds out what Dick did, it's obvious that his suppressed rage was so great that he acted far outside the bounds of its cause. In addition, he was the one originally at fault in the altercation for visiting another man's wife. Significantly, too, his first murder is of a Black man, someone who'd conceivably be an ally in Dick's tirade against racism. All this suggests that the rage stirred in Dick through racial injustice contributed to uncontrollable and irrational violence.

Two policemen, Willis and John Grady, arrive. They see Pansy's husband lying dead in the snow and approach the shack quietly, guns drawn. When Grady shines his flashlight through the window and calls for Dick to come out, Dick shoots him through the wrist, then turns and shoots Willis above the eyes just as Willis is kicking down the door. Just as Grady is calling for backup, Dick comes out of the shack, aims across the street, and shoots Grady through the temple.

Dick makes it evident that he simply intends to kill anyone who gets in his way. He seems to have no obvious target or goal. He unleashes his violence first on another Black man and then on any white policeman or other person who crosses his path. Because Dick's aims are unclear, he appears all the more sinister.

Dick strides unhurriedly up the middle of the street, shooting left and right as he moves toward town. When someone sticks his head out his window, Dick shoots the top off the man's head. The streets are silent because everyone knows now that he's coming. He turns onto South Dean Street and heads towards the square, shooting at a man through the window of a restaurant.

At the beginning of the story, Dick's shooting skill was framed as admirable. Now, however, his talent is cruel and terrifying as opposed to graceful and harmless. His perfect aim, his speed, and his stealth all make him monstrous, no longer an object of respect.

The police headquarters sends John Chapman to the square to intercept Dick. Mr. Chapman is a favorite on the police force, regarded as possibly too kind to be a policeman. Mr. Chapman stations himself behind the telephone posts, takes aim, and fires at Dick. Dick kneels and fires, and the bullet grazes Chapman and strikes a monument on the other side of the square. Chapman fires again and misses. Dick fires once more, calmly aiming from his knee, and shoots Chapman through the heart. Then he turns and marches straight out of town like a soldier.

This passage further suggests that Dick's shooting spree is indiscriminate. Significantly, Dick kills Chapman "through the heart," the place where kindness symbolically resides. This development pits Dick against a sympathetic policeman, suggesting that Dick's rage has become so intense that it leads him to kill innocent people.

After they all hear the story, the town gets quiet again. They can hear the hounds howling faintly by the river. Since there is nothing more to see, everyone goes back home, but no one can sleep. The snow continues to fall and muffle everything, and people wait eagerly for news of Dick's capture.

The narrator suggests that sleep has been ruined by Dick Prosser and, by implication, his innocence as well. He is no longer the naïve, trusting young man he was at the start of the story.

The police and the mob of townspeople trail Dick across the river and through a field into the woods. The dogs lose his scent for a while because he'd travelled upriver in the water, and they pick it up again several miles upstream on the other side. The mob circles around him where he is hiding hungry and cold in the woods. The next morning, he tries to run, but they see him and start after him. As they approach, he kneels and shoots, killing a deputy and two others. Then he retreats towards the creek, continuing to fire as he goes.

When he hides out in the woods and escapes upstream to hide his tracks, Dick employs skills he presumably would have learned in his Army days. Again, it isn't clear what Dick hopes to attain. If he escapes the police, where will he go? Even when he knows they have him cornered, he continues to fire at the mob, seeming to want only to kill as many people as he can.

At the creek's edge, Dick takes his last shot, shooting deputy Wayne Foraker in the forehead. Then he aims again, but this time, he doesn't fire. He throws the **gun** aside, at which point the mob cheers and charges forward. Instead of trying to escape across the creek, as the crowd expects, Dick sits down in the snow and unlaces his boots, placing them neatly beside him. Then he stands upright, poised like a soldier, and faces the oncoming mob. No one fully understands why he does this.

It is very perplexing why Dick takes off his boots before he is shot. Dick follows some code of his own, and has his own idea of dignity, standing barefoot facing his death, but no one can fathom what he means by it. This mystique is what's made him such an ambiguous and even sinister character all along.

The men on horseback enclose him and fire their guns. Dick falls to the snow, shot through with bullets. The other men come up, encircle his dead body, and riddle it with their own bullets. They tie a rope around the neck of the dead body and hang it from a tree, then empty their guns by firing at the hanging body.

This scene heavily gestures to the brutal lynchings of the post-Civil War south. One bullet would have killed Dick, but the mob is barbaric: they shoot him many times, hang his body to a tree, and shoot it some more, clearly acting out of racial hatred beyond any reasonable sense of justice.

The mob returns, bringing Dick's mutilated body on one of the horses. When they reach the town square, they hang the body in a window so that everyone can see. The boys say they won't go and look, but eventually they do, as people always go and look even at what horrifies them. When they see the body, they try to believe it is the same person who'd been gentle to them, taught them things, and told them secrets, but they can't. They feel sick and afraid about something they don't understand.

Dick's body is so disfigured, both by the mob's bullets and by the boys' awareness of what Dick did, that when they look at it, their memories of innocence and goodness are disfigured, too. They can't believe he is the same person who was gentle to them, and this contributes to their inability to find innocence in the people around them, in their memories, or in themselves. In effect, their childhood has ended.

The boys stand in front of Dick's body, looking away and looking back at it. The sky is dreary and grey. Everyone from town gathers around them to look, too, familiar to the boys in their everyday lives but also looking different, like "mongrel conquerors." A dark and confusing evil has come into the boys' lives, and they will always remember it, even when spring comes and warms the world with sunlight again. They know now that there is "something hateful and unspeakable in the souls of men."

Everything that's familiar to the boys has changed. They look at their neighbors and see monstrous savagery in their faces. Because he sees darkness in everyone, not just in Dick, the narrator attributes the "hateful and unspeakable" quality to humanity as a whole, ironically unifying everyone in their potential for darkness.

Beside the narrator, Ben Pounders, a ferret-faced man, is bragging about his triumph. He says he'd put the first bullet in Dick and points to the bullet hole in the corpse. Then he says that, in total, they'd put three hundred bullets in him. The crowd listens hungrily and gapes at the body. Nebraska Crane boldly congratulates the mob on killing "a big one." He walks away without any fear or doubt in his eyes while Randy and the narrator follow him, sick and scared.

The excessive violence with which the mob reacted to Dick's crime is disgusting in this passage. The reader finds out they shot Dick 300 times— an outrageous performance of violence and hatred. The crowd brags about their triumph, revealing their love of violence. Nebraska Crane has embraced this extreme as well, proving the harm that displays of violence can do to impressionable children—not long before, Nebraska, too, liked and admired Dick, but now he utterly dehumanizes Dick, much as Ben Pounders does.

A few days later, the narrator and Randy go into Dick's room with Mr. Shepperton. It is just as neat as before, but it feels alive with the memory of Dick. Mr. Shepperton goes over to the Bible on the table and opens it to where Dick had been reading last. He reads aloud "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want [...] I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Then he closes the book, and they leave the room, locking the door behind them. No one will ever go in there again.

In this scene, the shutting of the door on Dick's room so that "no one [will] ever go in there again," illustrates the final end to the boys' innocence. Dick's room and the Psalm they read from his Bible symbolize Dick's gentleness, which is now strange and confusing in light of recent events. Innocence no longer makes sense in their world, and so they shut the door on it.

Time passes, and the town forgets the incident as people go their various ways. But the memory often comes back to the narrator. He remembers kicking the ball with his friends, the shouts of their young voices, and the stealthy shadow of Dick moving in the night. He remembers the clanging alarm bell, the murmuring mob, the growling hounds, and the shadow he would never forget.

Even when the narrator tries to go back and remember his childhood, the shadow is never absent; he can no longer view those days in a totally innocent light. This suggests that the innocence the narrator thought he knew in childhood was really just a delusion. As an adult, he can see the ever-present shadow behind it.

The narrator remembers Dick's tidy room and the holiness of the Psalm that Mr. Shepperton had read aloud. The psalm perplexes him because it seems so unlike Dick. Recently, he heard another song that reminded him of Dick: "What the hammer? What the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain? […] Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

The narrator thinks of the William Blake poem when he thinks of Dick because it asks questions about where such a menacing beast could come from. The origin of the burning tiger is obscure in the poem, and so is the origin of Dick's darkness.

The narrator tries to answer the song's questions: "What the hammer? What the chain?" Many rumors circulate about where Dick came from and what he had done. Some people say he'd killed a man while in the Army and went to prison, while others say he went crazy and went to an asylum. No one knew where Dick really came from, but the narrator thinks he came from darkness. He thinks Dick is a symbol of "man's evil innocence," and that he was "a brother and a mortal enemy (…) two worlds together—a tiger and a child."

The town speculates as to where Dick literally came from, but the narrator knows he came from the figurative place of darkness. His final statement shows how his notions of good and evil have become indistinct, such that he believes Dick was evil and *innocent. When he says Dick was "a tiger and a child," it seems he is also talking about himself; his life is a combination of the innocence he felt as a child and the wickedness he now sees everywhere, even in himself.*

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