The Reservoir

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JANET FRAME

Janet Frame was a highly celebrated New Zealand author and a recipient of numerous awards, including the Order of New Zealand, the nation's highest civil award. Her early life was marked by trauma––growing up with poverty, family illness, and the death of two of her siblings, Frame found imagination and literature a form of escape. She graduated from Waitaki Girls' High School in 1942, and studied part-time at Otago University while she was a student at Dunedin Teachers' Training College from 1943-1944. Her teaching career was cut short by mental illness, and after being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia, she was a patient in mental hospitals from 1947-1954. Frame published her first book of short stories, *Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951), while in the hospital, and she continued to write after being discharged in 1954. After her release, she befriended fellow writer Frank Sargeson and lived on his property for two years while writing her first novel, *Owls Do Cry*. In the following years, she traveled abroad, publishing several more works that explored isolation, eccentricity, and conformity. She also continued to explore genre, publishing a book of poetry in 1967, a children's book in 1969, and a series of autobiographies that began in 1982. Frame passed away in 2004, but new works by her have been published posthumously as recently as 2013.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Reservoir" does not establish the year concretely, but given its publication date and the narrative's epidemic of Infantile Paralysis (also known as polio, which is no longer a pressing medical concern), readers can assume it takes place during the mid-20th century. Several epidemics of Infantile Paralysis like the kind in the story occurred during the 1950s, and thousands of children died of the disease worldwide. After World War II, many societies prioritized conformity as the world tried to return to normal, and the expectation of conformity and respect can be seen in the parents' attitude toward their children. The technological advances of this period are also evident, as the village's water pump is replaced by the Reservoir.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Janet Frame is among New Zealand's most famous writers, and the New Zealand landscape plays a crucial role in "The Reservoir." Fellow New Zealand author Frank Sargeson was a friend and contemporary of Janet Frame's, and his works are known for introducing New Zealand colloquialisms to wider literature. Frame was also inspired by the Romantic poets of the late 17th and early 18th centuries—such poets as William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—particularly regarding her interests in nature and the conflict between eccentricity and conformity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Reservoir
- **When Written:** 1960s
- **Where Written:** New Zealand
- **When Published:** 1966
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Otago, New Zealand
- **Climax:** The children arrive at the Reservoir.
- **Antagonist:** Fear, conformity, disease, expectations of obedience
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Woman of Many Names. In 1958, Frame changed her name by deed poll to combat her growing celebrity. The name she chose was Nene Janet Paterson Clutha, after the Māori leader Tamati Waka Nene and the Clutha River in Central Otago.

Posthumous Prizes. Frame won a New Zealand Poetry Prize for her book *The Goose Bath*. The book was published in 2006––two years after Frame died. The awarding of this accolade to a deceased writer generated controversy among the New Zealand literary crowd.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Reservoir" takes place in a mid-20th-century village in New Zealand, where a **Reservoir** has recently been installed. The Reservoir is at the edge of the wilderness surrounding the village, and the local children, including an unnamed narrator, are not allowed near it. The narrator's mother, along with neighbors and the other children's parents, forbid them from walking to the Reservoir because children have drowned there.

Obeying their parents, the children explore and play in the rest of the wilderness along the local gully. They especially love the **creek**, and they consider themselves in tune with its moods and tides. When the creek is on high-flow, it means the Reservoir is being purged of waste that flows into the creek.

The school year comes to an end, and the heat makes the children's summer vacation long and tedious. They play games, go swimming, and spread gossip, but soon all the children are looking forward to the start of the school year, the shade of school hallways, and the new experiences the year will bring.

However, school does not reopen––the village is struck by an epidemic of Infantile Paralysis, which kills children across the area. The children are forced to complete their lessons by post, still suffering from the heat and their boredom. To escape the monotony, the children play along the gully. They steal apples, and watch courting couples and joke about kissing and sex.

One day, the children can't find any apples or courting couples, so one of the children suggests they visit the Reservoir. The narrator acknowledges that all of the children knew they would, someday, explore the Reservoir, but she still voices her concern. When her friends dismiss her as a coward, the narrator changes her mind and goes along with them.

The walk to the Reservoir is long and lined with pine trees. The children believe that pine trees cry and whisper, but the speech is at a level beyond understanding. This sort of speech, in which the meaning is felt but not articulated, is what the narrator believes is speech's loneliest level.

As they walk, the children bicker and gossip. The narrator tries to imagine what the Reservoir will be like, picturing it as a place of darkness and danger. The children encounter a bull in its paddock. Although the bull has a ring in its nose, indicating it has been tamed, the bull looks like it might charge at them, so the children run away.

When they finally reach the Reservoir, the narrator is momentarily intimidated by the pine trees' whispering, but she and her friends quickly push away the fear, ignoring a noticeboard that warns of danger, and play around the Reservoir. They play until they notice it seems to be getting dark out. Frightened of the dark, they rush home, only to realize the sun has barely moved in the sky at all.

When they arrive home, the children aren't sure if they should tell their parents about their adventure. The question is answered for them when their parents remind them, as always, not to approach the Reservoir. The narrator laughs internally at her parents for being afraid.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator –The narrator is a student at the local school in a mid-20th-century New Zealand village, and a member of the tightly-knit group of children that explores the surrounding wilderness. The narrator's gender is not made explicit, but some hints in the text (such as a reference to wearing a skirt) indicate that the narrator is female. The narrator does not provide much insight into herself, instead focusing her attention on the people and events around her. Her parents, like the other adults in the village, value and expect respect from their children, so the narrator always obeys her mother. She is fascinated by the new **Reservoir**, and her curiosity persists even as her parents forbid her from exploring the Reservoir, where some children have drowned. The narrator is intimately familiar with the local woods, especially the **creek**. After an epidemic of Infantile Paralysis (polio) shuts down the school, the narrator joins her friends in playing outside. They play games imitating the trials of grown-up life, giggle and joke as they watch courting couples, and steal apples from orchards. When one of the children suggests walking to the Reservoir, though, the narrator is the first to protest. She blushes easily, and grown-ups can always tell when she is lying, so she timidly reminds the group that their parents told them not to go. However, she gives in after the other children call her a coward. The narrator first approaches the Reservoir with awe and fear, and she has the sensation that something terrible is sleeping in the Reservoir. Then, abruptly, she throws her fears aside and joins the other children in playing around the Reservoir. They play with glee until they worry that evening is approaching. The narrator's horrifying fantasies spin wilder and wilder as she races to return home, only to find herself safe and the sun still out when she and the other children reach the village. Initially she is unsure if she should tell her parents about breaking their rule, but she decides against it when they repeat the prohibition as soon as she gets home. The narrator scoffs at her parents' fear, dismissing it as out-of-date.

The Children –The children are a group of schoolchildren in the village who play together by the gully. None of the children are distinguished from one another, and they tend to act and think as one entity. They love to play in and explore nature, especially near the **creek**, which they consider their own. Like the narrator, the Children frequently speculate about **the Reservoir**, though, like the narrator, they are forbidden by their parents to approach it. For a while, they content themselves with other adventures, but when the school year ends and the summer grows increasingly hot, the Children become bored. They mimic and laugh at grown-ups by playing make-believe and spying on courting couples, but they soon lose interest in these games and only look forward to starting school again. When an Infantile Paralysis (polio) epidemic prevents the school from opening, the Children's boredom becomes desperation, and they decide to visit the Reservoir. Along the way, the Children gossip about Infantile Paralysis and bicker over how to pronounce various words, like *sprained* and *hospital*. They come across a bull in its paddock, and when it threatens to charge at them, they flee. Only then do they realize they have lost sight of their beloved creek. This briefly upsets them, so they hit the air with sticks until they forget their discontent and become cheerful again. When they finally reach the Reservoir, the Children ignore their parents'

warnings and the warning of a nearby noticeboard. They play around the Reservoir gleefully, quarreling over how to pronounce *Reservoir* until the sky appears to be getting dark. They run home to avoid the unknown dangers of the darkened wilderness, indicating that perhaps their courage is not as complete as they would like to think.

The Narrator's Mother – The narrator's mother gives orders to the narrator and her sister. She tells the narrator that the **Reservoir** has clean water, fulfilling some of the narrator's curiosity, but she consistently orders the narrator to stay away from the Reservoir itself. When she does let the narrator go out and play, the narrator's mother reminds her to keep a sun hat on and stay away from the Reservoir. With her neighbors, the narrator's mother discusses the dangers of the Reservoir, including the children who have drowned in it, and she regards the creek reaching high-flow as a terrifying tragedy. The high-strung nature of the narrator's mother reveals how parental love can become overbearing, while also poking fun at the disregard children have for the valid concerns of their parents.

The Narrator's Father – The narrator's father does not want his children near **the Reservoir**, though he takes a less active role in enforcing this role than the narrator's mother, and is overall less present in the story. When the narrator leaves the taps running, the narrator's father shouts that the **Reservoir** might run dry, which instills a fear of such an event in the narrator. The narrator describes him as bossy, a trait that some of the children occasionally try to mimic. When the children return from the Reservoir, the narrator's father looks up from his newspaper only after his wife reminds the children that they are not allowed near the Reservoir, and all he does is repeat the command.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Parents – The parents of the other children, who expect respect and forbid their children from walking to the **Reservoir.**

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.

MATURITY

"The Reservoir" is a story about children, and also about childishness. The narrative emphasizes the innocence of its young protagonists––but it also points out that adults are not always wiser or more mature than the children they seek to control. By turning conventions of maturity on their head, Janet Frame explores the nuances of childhood innocence while also granting agency and respect to the children in her story. The children are fascinated with "adult" experiences they don't understand, from giggling at the "courting couples" in town to playing games in which they "mimic grown-up life." However, the children know more than their parents give them credit for. While the children's parents warn them about dangers throughout the story, the narrator explicitly notes that all her friends know "the dangers, limitations and advantages" of the gully.

The story continues to subvert expectations of maturity by depicting the adults and children as equally immature in their arguments over word pronunciation. Frame links the arguments with similar words, describing both as "quarrels," which highlights the trivial nature of the debates and emphasizes that adults can often be as petty as children. Moreover, when the children finally break their parents' most explicit rule and explore **the Reservoir**, their youthful innocence lets them see the beauty of the Reservoir instead of the dangers. When they return home and see their parents' worry about the Reservoir, the narrator remarks, "How out-of-date they were! They were actually afraid!" These almost condescending last lines portray the children in a position of greater knowledge and courage than their parents. The parents are right to be worried, since children have drowned at the Reservoir in the past, but despite their inexperience, the children have proven themselves to be capable and self-sufficient. By contrasting adults and children in this way, Frame argues that children's understanding of the world may not be complete, but they should be acknowledged and respected for their unique perspectives.

INDEPENDENCE VS. OBEDIENCE

The theme of control runs through "The Reservoir." Frame repeats the phrase "for so long we obeyed" throughout the story to underline how much of the narrator's life is spent following orders, and the first paragraph presents the idea that animals and children must show respect to adults. Setting animals and children on the same level dehumanizes the children, implying that they are like livestock that must be herded. The metaphorical connection between children and animals is strengthened when the children encounter a bull on their adventures. It has a ring in its nose, indicating that "its savagery was tamed," and yet "it had once been savage and it kept its pride." Although the bull has submitted to authority, it retains some independence.

Aligning independence with "savagery" extends the idea of obedience to a broader context, moving from children obeying their parents to societal disobedience in general. The narrator expresses some distrust of authority when describing the high-flow **creek**, which "conceal[s] beneath a swelling fluid darkness whatever evil which 'they,' the authorities, had decided to purge

so swiftly and secretly from **the Reservoir**." The description of the authorities as "swift," "secretive," and "evil" paints them––and by extension, obedience to them––in a distinctly negative light, suggesting that they shouldn't be blindly trusted. When ultimately the children disobey their parents and explore the Reservoir, they assert their independence within a world that, on both a societal and familial scale, expects obedience. Such an assertion of independence, the story suggests, is a vital part of growing up.

FEAR, CURIOSITY, AND EXPLORATION

Just as **the Reservoir** provides the town with water, it is a source of inspiration for the local children's imaginations. The narrator imagines it as "a bundle of darkness" with a sleeping beast beneath its waters and "great wheels which peeled and sliced you like an apple." Yet this fear doesn't stop the children from exploring the Reservoir––in fact, it does the opposite. The mysterious Reservoir and its surrounding stories stir the children's curiosity, demonstrating how curiosity can inspire exploration even in the face of fear. When some of the children argue against exploring the Reservoir, it is the accusation of cowardice that convinces them to go anyway. The narrator acknowledges the group "ha[s] not quelled all our misgivings," yet they still "set out to follow the **creek** to the Reservoir." Immediately after noting her "misgivings," the narrator's curiosity spikes, and she spends much of the walk puzzling over what the Reservoir actually is. By immediately following fear with curiosity, Frame links the two, indicating how fear of the unknown can actually fuel the courage to overcome those fears.

Throughout the story, fear and excitement blend together. When the children run home from the Reservoir, they imagine "darkness overtak[ing]" them, and for the rest of the journey the narrator imagines the horrors that might befall the children as they run. Yet, when they do return home, the children laugh at their parents for being "out-of-date" and "afraid." The curiosity that fear inspires allows the children to face their fears, and by confronting the source of their anxiety, they overcome the fear entirely. This childlike curiosity gives the children an advantage over their parents by prompting them to explore what their parents withdraw from in fear.

FRIENDSHIP AND LONELINESS

The children in "The Reservoir" often act and think as one entity, and the narrator uses the pronoun "we" more often than "I" to describe how the story progresses. The rapidly-paced conversations the children have throughout the story rarely have dialogue tags. On the rare occasion the speaker is noted, the speaker is simply called "someone," and one dialogue tag refers to the speaker as "someone––brother or sister." The bond between the children is so strong that the children's individual identities do not separate them from each other. Rather, they are all each other's brothers and sisters.

The narrator is not omnipotent, but she frequently narrates what the whole group is thinking, which indicates that the friends are close enough to virtually read each other's minds. This sort of intuitive understanding is contrasted with the pine trees surrounding **the Reservoir**. Like the children, the pine trees speak to each other, but the trees lack the understanding that the children share. Though the pines whisper and sigh, their speech is "at its loneliest level where the meaning is felt but never explained." By highlighting this communication as the "loneliest" possible form, Frame implies that the key to friendship is not simply conversation, but being understood.

When contrasted to the loneliness of trees, the children's friendship becomes framed as a privilege––a privilege they do not try to help the pine trees share. Of course, pine trees can't literally speak or befriend one another, but the personification of the trees suggests that genuine community isn't universally enjoyed, and that human loneliness is never far away, whether we acknowledge it or not. Indeed, the children don't bother to try to understand the trees, assuming "if the wind who was so close to them could not help," they never could. Yet, when the children reach the Reservoir itself, the narrator describes the trees as "subjected to the wind." Framing the wind as an oppressive force against the trees makes the children's obliviousness less excusable. The children, despite being oppressed by their parents like the trees are oppressed by the wind, share a bond that the trees do not, and it is that friendship that allows them to overcome their parents' prohibition and visit the Reservoir. The children's naive carelessness leads them to disregard the lonely pines, hinting that friendship is not equally granted to everyone, perhaps especially those who need it most.

NATURE VS MODERNIZATION

Throughout the story, nature comes across as dangerous, petty, or even actively malicious. The world, according to the narrator, is "full of alarm": sunstroke, lightning, tidal waves, and the summer sun that "wait[s] to pounce" all present a threat to the residents of the village. In light of these dangers, **the Reservoir** represents human efforts to dominate part of the natural world. Even the children share this dominating instinct; the narrator wishes to "*make* [something] out of the bits of the world lying about us," and when the children realize the **creek** is "our creek no longer," they turn their gaze "possessively" on the Reservoir. The reservoir is "the end of the world," the last piece of civilization before the land gives way to threatening wilderness.

When the narrator at last reaches the Reservoir, she describes the "little [...] innocent waves," which paints the water as tamed and meek. However, it becomes evident that the Reservoir is

not an entirely successful conquest of the natural world. The convenience of tap water has not eased the fear of Infantile Paralysis that looms in the village, and the Reservoir has created its own dangers, too: according to the narrator's mother, multiple children have drowned in its waters. When the narrator sees the Reservoir herself, after describing its "innocent waves," the narrator gets the feeling that "something [was] sleeping" in the Reservoir that "should not be disturbed." And yet the children ignore this sense of danger, playing right beside the "DANGER" noticeboard and insisting that they are not afraid. Though the children return home seemingly triumphant, whatever is "sleeping" in the Reservoir—whether that "something" is natural or technological or both—remains unconfronted. Even where nature appears to have been successfully dominated, then, modernization can never eliminate nature's threats entirely, and in fact it might create new ones.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RESERVOIR

The **Reservoir** symbolizes adventure, modernization, and the unknown. The children's decision to visit the Reservoir is in direct defiance of their parents' orders, making the journey an act of rebellion. The Reservoir is new in town, and the parents view it with suspicion. The narrator describes the Reservoir as lying at the end of the world––meaning the end of the *civilized* world. Expectations of civility, respect, and obedience restrict the children, forcing them to remain in the bounds their parents set for them. However, the Reservoir stands outside those bounds, and neither the parents nor the children have a clear understanding of how the Reservoir functions. The narrator imagines it as a monstrous bundle of shadows, while her father worries that running the taps for too long will dry out the Reservoir's water supply. All the parents fear that their children will drown or hurt themselves if they explore the Reservoir. The parents' reactions to the Reservoir represent how different generations respond to the unknown: the parents are afraid, while the children are mostly curious.

The unknown is also tied to the future and modernization. The Reservoir has replaced the village's water pump, and some of the parents' distrust of it can be traced back to their lack of understanding about the technology of the Reservoir. This adds another generational layer to the contrast between the parents' fear and the children's curiosity, since it implies that the younger generation is more willing to embrace modern advances.

However, the parents' fear is well-founded. Children *have* drowned at the Reservoir in the past, and the children explicitly ignore the warning on a noticeboard when they play around the Reservoir. The narrator even senses that something dangerous and monstrous is asleep in the Reservoir, but still she insists she is not afraid. This indicates that the unknown is not always safe, which is why exploring it is indeed an adventure. And even once the children have seen the Reservoir, the notion that something lies deeper within it suggests that they still do not grasp the whole truth. In this way, the Reservoir remains the unknown––if the children want to learn more, they will have to plunge deeper into the Reservoir's depths.

THE CREEK

The **creek** represents the misguided human instinct to claim ownership of nature. The children love the creek, and they know it well enough that they consider it their own. When they decide to visit the **Reservoir**, they find it by following the creek. Though the creek's source is the mysterious Reservoir, and changes at the Reservoir affect the creek's flow, the children trust the creek to be their guide. The creek's connection to the Reservoir is the first hint that the creek is more than just a playground for the children. Since it feeds into a larger body of water, the creek is literally deeper (hence more free and dangerous) than it appears.

The moment the children are first in danger, when a bull in a paddock threatens to charge them, they lose sight of the creek. When they find it again, they realize it has stopped communicating with them, and is no longer *their* creek at all. This apparent fickleness on the creek's part symbolizes how nature does not necessarily follow the human will. Though the children thought they had ownership over the creek, in reality the creek remains a force of nature that is not beholden to them. Yet the creek is not actively malicious: it fulfills its promise to guide the children to the Reservoir, and as a result of this success, the children reclaim the creek as their same old creek. It only takes a moment for the creek to desert them again, however, as it disappears into the Reservoir. Not only is the creek not bound by human ownership, it does not follow the rules of human friendship and loyalty.

When the children run home, they find the creek has once again become foreign to them, and they are completely disoriented as they try to find their way back. They move from wishing the creek was still theirs, to wondering if they will have to sleep on its banks when night falls, to fearing that the creek will send evil eels after them. Now that the creek isn't obeying them, the children quickly reimagine it as a force of evil, again imposing a human role on the creek––if it will not be their friend, it must be an enemy. Their sudden fear of the creek mirrors the parents' fear of the Reservoir, suggesting that it is human instinct to misinterpret and mistrust uncontrollable

nature.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hassell Street Press edition of *The Reservoir: Stories and Sketches* published in 2021.

The Reservoir Quotes

[...] how important it was for birds, animals and people, especially children, to show respect! And that is why for so long we obeyed the command of the grownups and never walked as far as the forbidden Reservoir but were content to return 'tired but happy' (as we wrote in our school compositions) answering the question, Where did you walk today? with a suspicion of blackmail, 'Oh, nearly, nearly to the Reservoir!'

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story, and it establishes the Reservoir's status as a forbidden mystery for the children of the village. It also emphasizes the children's role in the local hierarchy: by paralleling children to animals, the narrator makes clear that while the children are expected to respect their elders, the adults do not respect their children. However, at this point in the story, the children are not bothered by the status quo. Their other adventures keep them content, since they still have the freedom to explore the rest of the gully. These excursions tire them out, especially in tandem with the demands of school (which the narrator alludes to by referencing school compositions), and because they are too tired to question authority, they are satisfied. The mention of school compositions indicates that the children's tired contentment comes from the combination of school, classwork, and adventures. The fact that the children record their happiness in compositions for their teacher also adds to the hierarchy between adults and children––it indicates a level of surveillance by the adults and an expectation that the children will report their lives honestly. This notion of surveillance continues when the adults ask where the children have walked "with a suspicion of blackmail," which elevates the adults' mistrust of and expectation of obedience from their children to almost sinister levels.

And for so long we obeyed our mother's command, on our favorite walks along the gully simply following the untreated cast-off creek which we loved and which flowed day and night in our heads in all its detail [...] We knew where the water was shallow and could be paddled in, where forts could be made from the rocks; we knew the frightening deep places where the eels lurked and the weeds were tangled in gruesome shapes; we knew the jumping places, the mossy stones with their dangers, limitations, and advantages; the sparkling places where the sun trickled beside the water, upon the stones; the bogs made by roaming cattle, trapping some of them to death; their gaunt telltale bones; the little valleys with their new growth of lush grass where the creek had 'changed its course,' and no longer flowed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2-3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children sate their desire for exploration while staying within the bounds of their parents' orders. The children love the creek, but this excerpt emphasizes what a dangerous force of nature it is. The description is rife with language of obscurity and confusion, like the "frightening deep places" where weeds and eels lurk, which hints that the creek is not entirely knowable, and that its true dangers cannot easily be detected. The narrator lingers on the deaths of the cows that the creek bogs have trapped––instead of including the description of the cattle's "gaunt telltale bones" within the same semicolon clause as the description of the bogs, the bones are given their own clause. By introducing the creek as a killer, the narrator complicates its depiction as a friend to the children and their favorite part of the gully. The creek's tendency to "change its course" also represents a certain fickleness to its nature. Despite the creek's hidden dangers, the children know how to navigate it, revealing that they are more capable than their parents give them credit for. They appreciate the beauty of the sun on the water, but they are also aware of the "dangers, limitations, and advantages" presented by playing at the creek.

> We swam. We wore bathing togs all day. We gave up cowboys and ranches; and baseball and sledding; and "those games" where we mimicked grown-up life, loving and divorcing each other, kissing and slapping, taking secret paramours when our husband was working out of town. Everything exhausted us.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children try to entertain themselves through the painfully hot summer with a variety of games. The narrator refers to "'those games'" that "mimic grown-up life" with special emphasis, implying the children take a certain mischievous pleasure from these games. "Those games" indicate the children's simplistic understanding of adult life. They conceive of adulthood as a series of dramatic dichotomies––loving and divorcing, kissing and slapping––that are no different from other games of make-believe, like cowboys and ranches. The games highlight the children's immaturity by portraying their understanding of adulthood as comedically superficial.

Ultimately, though, the children's games fail to break the monotony of summer, and the children give them up. The narrator complains that "everything exhaust[s] us," which contrasts her earlier description of the children as "tired but happy." Replacing "tired" with the stronger "exhausted" shows how the children have escalated from pleasantly worn-out and busy to a state of exhausting boredom.

> Our lessons came by post, in smudged print on rough white paper; they seemed makeshift and false, they inspired distrust, they could not compete with the lure of the sun still shining, swelling, the world would go up in cinders, the days were too long, there was nothing to do, there was nothing to do; the lessons were dull; in the front room with the navy-blue blind half down the window and the tiny splits of light showing through, and the lesson papers sometimes covered with unexplained blots of ink as if the machine which had printed them had broken down or rebelled, the lessons were even more dull.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children grapple with at-home learning after an outbreak of Infantile Paralysis has shut down the school. They had hoped returning to school would offer a reprieve from the heat and boredom of summer, but instead the children have to complete lessons through the mail. Not only do the children distrust these lessons-by-post, which they do not perceive as proper schoolwork due to the papers' "makeshift" nature, but the lessons also fail to fulfill the children's need for stimulation. The careful balance of tired contentment from earlier in the story has fallen apart, and the boredom weighs heavily on the children. The narrator's repetition of "there was nothing to do" emphasizes how she is dwelling on this inactivity. The sun "lures" the children outside to continue their exploration, but their usual adventures feel hopeless as the heat threatens to send the world "up in cinders." At the beginning of the story, the children were content with the status quo because their schoolwork, combined with their games in the gully, appeased their curiosity and need for exploration. With the school closed by Infantile Paralysis and their games worn out by a hot summer of playing them, however, "the days [a]re too long," and the children are desperate for a new way to fill them. The narrator projects this unfilled curiosity onto the lesson papers themselves, taking interest in the "unexplained blots of ink." Even in the midst of utter boredom, she wonders if the printer "had broken down or rebelled," hinting at her own desire to break out of the dull monotony of life within her parents' constraints.

> We followed the creek, whacking our sticks, gossiping and singing, but we stopped, immediately silent, when someone — sister or brother — said, 'Let's go to the Reservoir!'
>
> A feeling of dread seized us. We knew, as surely as we knew our names and our address Thirty-three Stour Street Ohau Otago South Island New Zealand Southern Hemisphere The World, that we would some day visit the Reservoir, but the time seemed almost as far away as leaving school, getting a job, marrying.
>
> And then there was the agony of deciding the right time — how did one decide these things?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children finally decide to go to the Reservoir. The wisdom of this decision is questioned, both by the narrator and the narrative itself: should the choice be made so off-handedly, when the children are simply "whacking [their] sticks, gossiping and singing"? The narrator also wonders how such a decision should be made, and notes the "agony" of finding the right time. Her assertion that visiting the Reservoir has always seemed "almost as far away as leaving school, getting a job, marrying" is a reminder of how young the children are. To them, these milestones are features of a future too distant to even wrap their minds around.

The narrator also recites her address in a childish manner. She leaves out the appropriate punctuation, giving the impression that she is running the whole address together in one breath, and the increasing scale of the address––from street to village to region to island to nation to hemisphere to world––is reminiscent of a child who has recently learned geography and been made to memorize her address and its context on a map.

The fact that the child who suggests visiting the Reservoir is not identified speaks to how unified the children are. In fact, the child's only designation is "sister or brother." The narrator and her little sister are both members of the group of children, so it is possible that this child is a blood relative, but the ambiguity over whether the child is actually related to the narrator indicates that all the children see each other as family, regardless of blood.

> Perhaps we would have to sleep there among the pine trees with the owls hooting and the old needle-filled warrens which now reached to the center of the earth where pools of molten lead bubbled, waiting to seize us if we tripped, and then there was the crying sound made by the trees, a sound of speech at its loneliest level where the meaning is felt but never explained, and it goes on and on in a kind of despair, trying to reach a point of understanding. We knew that pine trees spoke in this way.
>
> We were lonely listening to them because we knew we could never help them to say it, whatever they were trying to say, for if the wind who was so close to them could not help them, how could we?
>
> Oh no, we could not spend the night at the Reservoir among the pine trees.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator fears what will happen to the children if they stay out too late and spend the night at the Reservoir. The wilderness around the gully, which the children have played in for years and are intimately familiar with, becomes a source of numerous dangers. Not only is the area around the Reservoir dangerous, but the narrator perceives it as actively hostile: she imagines the warrens as "waiting to seize" the children and drag them to the center of the earth if they make even the smallest misstep. The narrator further distances herself and her friends from nature by describing the trees' whispers as lonely and incomprehensible. The children are tightly bonded to each other, so much so that the narrator describes her inner thoughts in the plural form: "we knew," and "we were lonely," because she is so strongly unified with her friends. The pine trees, on the other hand, are presented as an unknowable community that the children are too intimidated by to try to understand. This is also the first instance when the children are faced with their own fear, rather than the fears of their parents. They have struggled against boredom and discontentment, but after resolving to visit the Reservoir, the children's imaginations, which have so far only served them in their games and gossip, erupt into fantasies of danger.

> What is it? I wondered. They said it was a lake. I thought it was a bundle of darkness and great wheels which peeled and sliced you like an apple and drew you toward them with demonic force, in the same way that you were drawn beneath the wheels of a train if you stood too near the edge of the platform.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, in which the narrator ponders the nature of the Reservoir, is one of the only times in the story when the narrator describes her own thoughts and not the thoughts of the children as a whole. This creates some confusion regarding who "they" refers to when the narrator says, "They said it was a lake." "They" might refer to the other children, whom the story depicts as given to quarreling amongst themselves about the definitions of words, and who might have had a similar quarrel about what the Reservoir is. "They" could also refer to the narrator's parents and the other local adults, who have told her many facts about the Reservoir but have failed to satisfy her curiosity about it.

The fact that the narrator rejects what "they" say and instead posits her own opinion is a rare moment of independence. She does not act on her own, away from the other children, but in this passage, she asserts herself as an individual who is capable of thinking on her own. The narrator's imagined version of the Reservoir resonates with the joint themes of fear and curiosity that run throughout the story. The "bundle of darkness" that draws people in "with a demonic force" is terrifying, but the uncertainty around this image is what drives the narrator to investigate the truth. She wonders about what the Reservoir is because she has not received a satisfying answer, and she is not content to depend on her own imagination.

Comparing the Reservoir to a train also reminds the reader of the Reservoir's status as a technological spectacle. The narrator perceives both the Reservoir and the train as dangerous, and sees the same "demonic force" in each of them, despite being more familiar with trains than she is with the Reservoir. This speaks to the rapid technological advances of the 20th century, when the story is set, and how these changes could be perceived as both helpful and dangerous by the people whose lives they affected.

> Its nose was ringed which meant that its savagery was tamed, or so we thought; it could be tethered and led; even so, it had once been savage and it kept its pride, unlike the steers who pranced and huddled together and ran like water through the paddocks, made no impression, quarried no massive shape against the sky.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children encounter a bull alone in its paddock. They quickly check to see if the bull has a ring through its nose, which would indicate it has been domesticated. However, the children's assumption that a domesticated bull poses no threat is quickly challenged. The bull has "kept its pride," and it is not willing to be commanded by humans. This preconception that a tamed bull is necessarily safe demonstrates two fallacies on the children's part: their naivete and their human misunderstanding of nature. The children are young, and have only limited information available to them. Their experience with tamed bulls (steers) has told them that steers lack the "savagery" of wild bulls, so they trust that a bull who can be "tethered and led" is safe to approach. The children are also demonstrating a complete faith in the ability of humans (specifically local adults) to tame a wild animal, and they neglect to wonder if the bull might *not*, in fact, have lost its wild edge.

The bull with its pride represents the aspects of nature that humanity cannot tame. The bull's solitude is emphasized in the story; "the bull stood alone" is granted its own paragraph. This isolation contrasts with the children's friendship, and it also contrasts with the steers the children are familiar with. The steers who "pranced and huddled together" are the ones who have yielded to human command, while the bull who stands alone is the one who keeps his pride. By linking isolation with rebellion and strength, the story suggests that resisting conformity is an inherently isolating endeavor. Describing these tamed steers as "[running] like water" calls to mind the Reservoir and the creek, and it further hints at the children's belief in taming forces of nature that cannot entirely be tamed.

> We saw [the creek] now before us, and hailed it with more relief than we felt, for [...] it had undergone change, it had adopted the shape, depth, mood of foreign water, foaming in a way we did not recognize as belonging to our special creek, giving no hint of its depth. It seemed to flow close to its concealed bed, not wishing any more to communicate with us. We realized with dismay that we had suddenly lost possession of our creek. Who had taken it? Why did it not belong to us any more? We hit our sticks in the air and forgot our dismay. We grew cheerful.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the children find the creek again after losing it during their encounter with the bull. They are not as relieved as they expect to be at coming across the creek again, however, because the creek has "undergone change." The notion of dominating nature reappears as the children are hurt that the creek they think of as their own does not "[wish] any more to communicate with us." The creek seems to reject the children's desire to own it, and it pulls away from them by adopting the characteristics of "foreign water." The creek also "giv[es] no hints to its depth," which represents how the creek has more beneath the surface than the children can know. Instead of questioning why the creek has turned against them, the children assume that someone else has "taken" the creek from them, revealing their uncritical belief in humans' possession of nature. The children's immaturity also emerges in this section of the story. Their dismay over "los[ing] possession" of the creek seems genuine, and the narrator emphasizes all the ways the creek has changed as if each is a personal betrayal––yet the children quickly cheer themselves up by simply hitting the air with sticks. By transitioning out of this passage with such a comedic example of immaturity, the story makes a connection between childish naivete and the assumption of humans' superiority, a connection that paints the latter idea as implicitly foolish.

> In the Reservoir there was an appearance of neatness which concealed a disarray too frightening to be acknowledged except, without any defense, in moments of deep sleep and dreaming. The little sparkling innocent waves shone now green, now gray, petticoats, lettuce leaves; the trees sighed, and told us to be quiet, hush-sh, as if something were sleeping and should not be disturbed — perhaps that was what the trees were always telling us, to hush-sh in case we disturbed something which must never ever be awakened? What was it? Was it sleeping in the Reservoir? Was that why people were afraid of the Reservoir? Well we were not afraid of it, oh no...

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Children

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage near the end of the story, the narrator expresses her initial impressions of the Reservoir. The "little sparkling innocent waves" are beautiful, and comparing them to petticoats and lettuce leaves implies a level of human domination––petticoats are made by humans to be worn by humans, and lettuce is cultivated by humans to be eaten by them. Yet the waves' rapid changes between colors as they shine "now green, now gray" suggests a fickleness even at the most surface layer of the Reservoir.

Beneath this surface lies the "disarray," the culmination of all the dangers the children have sensed lurking in the wilderness through their adventures. The pine trees, which the children have never understood, finally make themselves known as they warn the children "to hush-sh," to prevent them from "disturb[ing] something which must never ever be awakened."

This warning shows that nature is not a unified front the way the children are. The pine trees do not want to awaken whatever is asleep within the Reservoir, suggesting that various features of the landscape have their own feelings and loyalties. This complicates the human understanding of nature as simple in contrast to human complexity, and by portraying nature as a community of individuals, the story frames the natural world as equally important and multifaceted as the world of humans. Perhaps even more so, given how the children tend to act and think as one entity.

The repeated language of sleep, which both describes the presence lurking in the Reservoir and the state of mind a person needs to acknowledge the Reservoir's disarray,

brings an unreal quality to the Reservoir, and the duality in its description makes it seem at once dreamlike and nightmarish. The motif of sleep and dreams also challenges the notion that the Reservoir is a triumph of human modernization. The Reservoir is supposedly a feature of practicality and a service to the local community; however, dreams are, by nature, impractical, and implying that the heart of the Reservoir is asleep means that the Reservoir is not wholly dedicated to serving the people of the village.

Though the narrator comes to the realization that she cannot fully understand the Reservoir's depths, and that there is something within them that she should not disturb, she negates the building tension of the previous paragraphs by insisting, "Well we were not afraid of it, oh no." The children's fear, rather than serve as an obstacle to their exploration, is what inspires them to approach the Reservoir. They must prove to themselves that they are not afraid, so they decide that they are not. In this way, fear itself is what propels the children to action, and their childish pride allows them to overlook the dangers and pursue adventure.

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 RESERVOIR

The children of a New Zealand village love to play in the wilderness around the local gully, though the village has some disdain for the wildlife. The village agrees that respect is important for "birds, animals and people, especially children." Because they value respect, the children follow the orders of their parents and do not explore the local **Reservoir**, which stands past the gully "at the end of the world." They go on long walks together, and when their suspicious parents ask where the children went, they always respond, "Oh, nearly, nearly to the Reservoir!"

As the backdrop for most of their games, the wilderness plays a significant role in the children's lives. Their connection to nature is limited, however, by their parents' orders about how far the children can explore. The village adults' emphasis on respect does not seem to bother the children, despite the fact that they themselves are arguably disrespected by the notion that animals and children should be respectful. This belief dehumanizes children and places wildlife within the human hierarchy of respect, too.

The Reservoir replaced a water pump and has brought running water to the town. When the narrator is careless with the water taps, her father scolds her, expressing his concern that the Reservoir might run dry. This frightens the narrator, who is afraid of dying of thirst if the Reservoir dries up. The narrator's mother tells her the Reservoir gives pure, "treated" water. The narrator doesn't know what "treated" means, and imagines that "during the night men in light-blue uniforms" drag corpses to the Reservoir "to dissolve dead bodies and prevent the decay of teeth."

The newness of the Reservoir indicates that the story is set in the mid-20th century, when developments in water treatment began to expand to rural areas. It also introduces a theme of modernization that runs throughout the story, and it stands in contrast with the wilderness that the narrator has emphasized so far. The mother's explanation in this passage that the Reservoir gives the village pure water shows how the village appreciates the Reservoir, but the father's concern that the Reservoir might run dry reveals that the villages don't have a full understanding of how a reservoir works. This puts the adults on a surprisingly similar level to their children, whose imagined versions of the Reservoir paints it as a terrifying unknown.

The parents of the town discuss **the Reservoir**. They claim children have drowned there, and they all agree "no child [...] ought to be allowed near the Reservoir." The children obey this command, and instead play around the village. They walk along the gully, wading in the "untreated cast-off **creek** which we loved." The children know the land well––where the water is safe for paddling, where eels and weeds lurk, where to jump, and all the "dangers, limitations, and advantages."

The Reservoir continues to be presented as a symbol of danger and the unknown. The creek, on the other hand, is untreated, and the children consider it safe and familiar. Despite their familiarity with the creek, they acknowledge its hazards, which shows that even well-known features of nature are not without risks. The children's awareness of the creek's risks, and their ability to navigate these risks, prove that they are more capable than their parents believe them to be.

The children also know "the moods of **the creek**," which often changes its course. The creek's course is a source of discussion and reverence from the children and their parents. When the creek is "high-flow," churning with turbulence and mud, it is full of waste from "whatever evil which 'they,' the authorities, had decided to purge" from **the Reservoir**.

The children know the creek well enough to follow its fickle moods, which again emphasizes their connection to nature and nature's resistance to being defined. The creek has been affected by the construction of the Reservoir, which shows how modernization reshapes nature, often harmfully. The Reservoir also enters the hierarchy of humans and nature here: the mysterious authorities are the only entity that can control the Reservoir, and the narrator sees them as a faceless entity that casts evil from the Reservoir into the children's beloved creek. This negative interpretation of authority contradicts the importance of respect for authority that the village expects of children.

The children continue to obey their parents and avoid **the Reservoir** as the school year comes to an end. The summer is long and hot, and the children quickly break or lose interest in their Christmas presents. To pass the tedious days, the children spread rumors. Between hours of games and swimming, the children tell outlandish stories about sharks and the sea drying up. They also play games "mimick[ing] grown-up life, loving and divorcing each other."

Even in the boring, hot days of summer, the children do not break their parents' rules. Instead, the friends create their own society in imitation of adulthood. Their overly simplistic understanding of grown-up life emphasizes their immaturity and naivete. Their enjoyment of rumors also mirrors their parents' tendency to gossip with neighbors, specifically about the dangers of the Reservoir. While the adults gossip about the Reservoir and the children prefer more dramatic stories about sharks and the world burning up, both the adults and the children like to gossip about catastrophe. This highlights how the children's immaturity does not separate them from adults as much as the adults might expect.

The summer heat drains the life from the children and the dried-out world around them. The exhaustion is so extreme that the children are relieved to realize that school will soon reopen. The school year seems so far away that the narrator assumes the children have "forgotten everything [they] had learned, how frightening, thrilling and strange it would all seem!" As the children wait for school to start, they look forward to the school's shady interior. Before lessons can begin, however, an epidemic of Infantile Paralysis sweeps the village. The schools do not reopen, and the children have to receive their schoolwork by mail.

The heat is so oppressive and exhausting that the children no longer enjoy their games or their walks along the creek. Their desperation for something new foreshadows the possibility that the children will need to seek out a new adventure if their need for stimulation is not satisfied. The narrator's nervous excitement for the new school year also speaks to how enthusiastically the children greet new experiences, reinforcing their characterization as curious and energetic. Their excitement is crushed, however, when disease closes the school, which robs the children of the break from monotony that they need.

The children are so bored by the heat and their lessons by post that they decide to walk by **the creek**. The narrator's mother reminds the narrator not to go to **the Reservoir**, but the children "dismiss the warning." The children like to watch courting couples and make jokes about kissing and sex. They wonder if the young men in the couples will use a "frenchie," or condom, because if he does not, his girlfriend will "start having a baby and be forced to get rid of it by drinking gin." However, on this day there are no couples, so the children follow the creek until someone suggests they go to the Reservoir.

The casual dismissal of the mother's warning marks a shift in the children's respect for their parents. Infantile Paralysis (polio) has disrupted the status quo they usually adhere to, and their frustration and boredom have undermined the children's respect for that status quo. The children's amusement about courting couples is another instance of their fascination with adult topics they don't understand. The children know a condom prevents babies, but they do not understand the nuances of sex, pregnancy, or abortion. The children are in desperate need of an activity, and the lack of fun to be had with courting couples proves to be a breaking point.

The children are unsure. They have always known they would someday visit **the Reservoir**, but that day seemed far away and they aren't sure this is the right time. The narrator "timidly" says that the children have been told not to go, but they decide to go to the Reservoir anyway. It is a long way there, and the narrator wonders if the walk will take all day and night, and the children will have to sleep among the pine trees, with hooting owls, old warrens "waiting to seize us if we tripped," and the crying of the trees. The narrator believes pine trees speak to each other. Listening to them makes the children lonely because "we could never help them say [...] whatever they were trying to say."

The revelation that the children have always known they would visit the Reservoir calls into question how genuine their respect for their parents has been. They have obeyed their parents' wishes up to this point, but they always knew one day that obedience would end. The narrator shares this feeling, but she notes that their parents would object. The narrator does not often voice her own opinion separately from the group, and when she does so here, she is timid and easily convinced to change her mind. Shortly after this moment of individuality, the narrator muses about the loneliness of the pine trees. Though the pine trees whisper to the children, their speech is incomprehensible. This is presented in contrast to the easy communication among the children, who usually act and think as one. The lonely pine trees are part of a frightening forest landscape, whose lurking warrens and hooting owls are much scarier than the familiar creek in the gully.

The children discuss Billy Whittaker and the Green Feather gang, who went to the Reservoir one afternoon. Billy Whittaker got an iron lung two years ago after a bout of Infantile Paralysis, and all the children envy "the glamour of an iron lung." One of the children, in a voice "trying to sound bossy like our father," urges the others onward toward the Reservoir. They move on, waving sticks and trying to make them into musical instruments. Their efforts fail, much to their frustration. The narrator wonders, frustrated, "why [can't] we ever *make* anything out of the bits of the world lying about us?"

Once again, the children's love of gossip emerges. This time, their discussion reveals they do not take Infantile Paralysis seriously, and they care more about the "glamour" of the iron lung that one of their classmates got after suffering from the disease. An iron lung is a feat of modern medicine, and it represents the ultimate fusion of nature (the human body) with technology (a metal organ)—suggesting that such a fusion can have benign effects, though a crippling disease is what makes this technology necessary. The child who tries to mimic their father's authority recalls how the children enjoy imitating what they perceive as the core tenets of adult life; this suggests that the children see bossiness as an intrinsic feature of adulthood. As the children continue on and fail to make instruments out of sticks, their desire to make useful things out of nature parallels how the authorities of the Reservoir aim to dominate nature and make practical use of it.

An airplane passes, and all the children pause to look at it. Then they continue to **the Reservoir**. The narrator wonders what exactly the Reservoir is. People say that it is a lake, but the narrator thinks it is "a bundle of darkness" whose wheels can "dr[a]w you toward them with demonic force." The children pass wild plants and reach the end of the gully, where they encounter new barbed-wire fences and signs against trespassers.

The children's interest in the passing airplane reaffirms their interest in the technological advances they are witnessing as they grow up. That interest becomes fear of the Reservoir, as the narrator (once again thinking for herself, not as part of the unit of children) imagines the Reservoir's wheels as demonic weapons. As the children get closer to the Reservoir, the replacement of wild plants with barbed wire underscores that they are nearing an area where humans have conquered nature.

As they venture onward, the children come across a bull paddock. The bull inside has a ring through its nose, indicating that it has been tamed, but "it had once been savage and it kept its pride." The bull stands alone in its paddock. The children recall a neighbor, Mr. Bennet, who was gored by his own tame bull, and when one of them notices the bull is pawing the ground preparing to charge, the children flee. After regaining their courage, they move around the paddock and keep heading for **the Reservoir**.

Though the children assume that a domesticated bull with a ringed nose will pose no threat to them, the natural savagery of this wild animal has not been entirely tamed. The failure of the bull's owner to erase its "pride" represents how nature cannot be fully restrained by humans.

The children's path brings them back along **the creek**, and though they express relief, the creek seems to have changed while it disappeared by the bull-paddock. It "foam[s] in a way we did not recognize as belonging to our special creek," and they realize "we had suddenly lost possession of our creek." The children are upset, so to cheer themselves up they wave their sticks in the air, which successfully lets them "forg[e]t our dismay."

The children are distressed to find the creek has changed in their absence. They think of the creek as theirs, but the creek's surprising change in current and water quality shows that the creek was never theirs––it is a force of nature that cannot be tamed by humans. However, the children quickly forget their distress by simply waving sticks, which speaks to their immaturity.

One of the children says that it's getting late, and they remind each other that the sun doesn't seem to move during the summer until people stop looking at it. This leads to a discussion of the tropics. The children correct each other about sand and snails until one of them sprains an ankle, after which they "quarrel" over how to pronounce "sprained," "ambulance," and "hospital."

The children's belief that the sun only moves when they stop looking at it calls to mind childish games like "Red Light, Green Light." It also echoes the childish belief that the world responds to one person's actions. The children's immaturity and youthful energy are further emphasized by their rapid changes in discussion. The themes of injury and illness that run through their quarrels also hint at the dark undertones of Infantile Paralysis and drowning that haunt the children's lives.

While the children bicker, **the creek** goes on high-flow. Their discomfort vanishes, and the children are confident this is their "same old creek." They approach a wide spread of pine trees, staying close to the creek until it "desert[s]" them. Between the trees, they find a "vast" and "dazzling" body of water––the **Reservoir**. The children cry out in excitement.

The children overlook the potential dangers of high-flow and any implications it might carry about the Reservoir, instead focusing on their relief that the creek has become familiar again. Their relief is short-lived, however, because once they reach the Reservoir, the creek abandons them once again. The pine trees, previously symbols of isolation and anxiety, surround the Reservoir. Their presence suggests something dark about the Reservoir, despite its dazzling surface.

The Reservoir appears calm and quiet. There are no birds, and the only sound is the sighing of the pine trees. The narrator perceives that the Reservoir's "appearance of neatness" hides a lack of order. The trees' sighing seems to hush the children, "as if something were sleeping and should not be disturbed." The narrator wonders what is sleeping in the Reservoir, and if that thing is why people are afraid of it. The children, however, are no longer afraid of the Reservoir. They climb through the fence and swing on trees, ignoring the noticeboard that says *DANGER, RESERVOIR*.

The contrast between order and disarray reflects the order between human civilization and natural wilderness. Despite the Reservoir's apparent usefulness and beauty, its depths still hold something beyond human comprehension that even the pine trees are afraid of. Though the narrator is wise enough to sense this danger, she declares that the children are not afraid of the Reservoir and joins her friends in playing around it. Throughout their journey, the children have swung between fear and excitement, and now, despite the obvious hazards, they have settled on excitement. In fact, the narrator's insistence that the children are not afraid suggests that they approach the Reservoir to prove their courage to each other and themselves, which positions fear as the motivating factor for exploration.

The children play around **the Reservoir**, regarding it "possessively and delightedly," until it seems to be getting dark. One of the children starts to run, and everyone else follows toward **the creek**. They recognize the creek is no longer theirs, though they wish it still was. The children have no idea what time it is, and they imagine darkness overtaking them, forcing them to sleep on the banks of the creek that is no longer theirs, surrounded by wild plants and dead animals. They wonder if the eels will emerge from the creek and shapeshift into various threats. Their fears grow––maybe the eels will give the children Infantile Paralysis, trapping them in the woods where no one would find them or bring them an iron lung.

The children have accepted that they don't have possession of the creek, but that has not taught them not to try to own nature: instead, they turn their eyes on the Reservoir. When they lose track of time, the children's fears return, and all the threats of nature loom as they run home. As their fears spiral, the children worry about Infantile Paralysis, revealing that they understand the severity of the disease—though they still view Billy Whittaker's iron lung as a source of envy.

Finally, the children return home, out of breath and scratched up from their journey. "How strange," the narrator thinks, as she realizes the sun is still in the same place in the sky. The children wonder if they should tell their parents where they have been, but "the question [is] decided for [them]." The narrator's mother greets the children at the door saying, "I hope you didn't go anywhere near **the Reservoir**," and the narrator's father looks up from his newspaper to echo the same sentiment. The children say nothing, instead sharing a mutual disdain and amusement for the fear of the "out-of-date" parents.

The contrast between the children returning home physically scratched and the sun still being in the same spot in the sky reflects that while the children have changed on their journey, the world around them is still the same. The fact that the children wonder whether they should confess where they have been also suggests they still hold some respect for their parents, though that respect is shaken when the narrator realizes she has overcome a fear her parents still hold. Being afraid of the Reservoir is "out-of-date," and describing it as such hints at a generational divide between the adults, who worry about the risks of modernization, and the children, whose curiosity and friendship have allowed them to become more comfortable with technology—though perhaps still naïve about its dangers.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Smith, Tucker. "*The Reservoir*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Sep 2022. Web. 29 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Smith, Tucker. "*The Reservoir*." LitCharts LLC, September 29, 2022. Retrieved September 29, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-reservoir.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Reservoir* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Frame, Janet. The Reservoir. Hassell Street Press. 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Frame, Janet. The Reservoir. New York: Hassell Street Press. 2021.