The Thing in the Forest

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF A.S. BYATT

A. S. Byatt was born Antonia Susan Drabble, the daughter of John Drabble, a barrister, and Kathleen Bloor, a scholar of Robert Browning. She was educated at two independent boarding schools, Sheffield High School and the Quaker Mount School in York. From there, she went on to study at Newnham College, Cambridge, Bryn Mawr College in the United States, and Somerville College, Oxford. She is married to Peter John Duffy, her second husband, and has three daughters. Byatt has taught English and literature at the Central School of Art and Design as well as the University of London. A distinguished critic and reviewer as well as novelist, Byatt's novels include the Booker Prize-winning *Possession*, *The Biographer's Tale* and the Frederica Potter quartet, which includes *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*. She is also an accomplished writer of short stories. Her story collections include *Sugar and Other Stories*, *The Matisse Stories*, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, *Elementals* and *Little Black Book of Stories*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in 1939, the British government evacuated roughly 3.5 million people—mostly children, pregnant women, and people with disabilities—from London and other cities. This was done for their protection, as Britain expected the German air force, called the *Luftwaffe*, to begin bombing London after Britain declared war on Germany following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. A. S. Byatt herself was one of these evacuees, and she drew on that experience when writing "The Thing in the Forest." World War II was, of course, a deeply troubling time for Europe and world at large. The titular "thing" in "The Thing in the Forest" is symbolic of trauma and loss in the most general sense, but also represents the collective trauma of such an inconceivably catastrophic war.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Byatt writes in a style reminiscent of magical realism, in which elements of fantasy are woven into everyday life rather than an escape from it. The darkly supernatural elements in "The Thing in the Forest" make it comparable to the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, who became recognized only after his death for his contributions to the genre of "dark fantasy" or horror fiction, such as "The Rats in the Walls" and "The Call of Cthulhu," another story with a mysterious, supernatural creature at its center. Other likely influences of Byatt's work include Edgar Allan Poe's macabre stories and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis is another work—albeit a very different one—that centers around children who are evacuated to escape the Nazi bombing of London and encounter a magical world in the process.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Thing in the Forest
- **When Written:** 2000s
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fantasy; horror
- **Setting:** The story begins at a house in the English countryside in the 1940s, and concludes at that same house in 1984
- **Climax:** An adult Penny returns to the forest a second time
- **Antagonist:** The Thing in the Forest (i.e., the loathly worm)
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Family of letters. A.S. Byatt is the sister of English novelist Margaret Drabble, who has written 19 novels. Drabble has said her relationship with her sister could be described as a "normal sibling rivalry."

Source material. Like Penny and Primrose in the story, Byatt herself was evacuated during World War II.

PLOT SUMMARY

Penny and Primrose are two girls who are evacuated with a group of children to a **mansion** in the English countryside during World War II. They are evacuated to escape the Nazi bombing of London (i.e., the Blitz), which took place from 1940-41. Penny is tall, thin, pale, and possibly older than Primrose, who is plump with curly blond hair. They become friends on the train, discussing their bewilderment over their evacuation, wondering "whether it was a sort of holiday or a sort of punishment."

The girls arrive, along with a group of many other children, at the mansion—a big, eerie place surrounded by a **forest**. They are anxious and scared, thinking of themselves as orphans. Some of the children cry themselves to sleep that first night. The next morning, after breakfast, Penny and Primrose decide to explore the forest. A younger child, Alys, wants to go with them, but they tell her no, saying she is too little. Creeping into the forest, the two girls hear a "crunching, a crackling, a

crushing, a heavy thumping, combining with threshing and thrashing," plus a host of other noises. They also smell a stench like that of "maggoty things at the bottom of untended dustbins, blocked drains, mixed with the smell of bad eggs, and of rotten carpets and ancient polluted bedding." Finally, they see a giant, fleshy caterpillar-like creature trundling through the forest, crushing foliage in its path and wailing terribly as it passes.

When **the thing** is gone, the frightened girls return to the mansion. The next day, they are sent to stay in separate places for the rest of the evacuation. They can't forget what they saw, though they don't discuss it with anyone. After the evacuation, the girls return to their families, which the war has altered. Primrose's father has been killed on a troop carrier in the Far East, and afterwards her mother remarries, having five more children. Penny's father dies in a fire in London. The years pass, and Penny goes to university, studying developmental psychology. Primrose struggles in school, due to having to babysit her younger siblings. Penny becomes a child psychologist, while Primrose holds a series of odd jobs before settling down as a children's storyteller.

In 1984, Penny and Primrose, having had no contact during the forty years since they saw the thing in the forest, travel separately to the country mansion, which has been turned into a museum. They run into each other while looking at an old book on display. The book tells the story of the Loathly Worm, a giant creature that, according to legend, had once terrorized the countryside around the mansion.

Delighting at their reunion, the women have tea and talk about their lives. Neither is married, and neither has children. Finally, they discuss the day they met the loathly worm in the forest. "Did you ever wonder," Primrose asks, "if we really saw it?" Penny replies, "Never for a moment." They discuss the horror of that day, and how their lives have been affected. They wonder what happened to Alys, the child who had wanted to go with them into the forest, and agree that the worm must have killed her. After the discussion, the women feel better, realizing that they aren't crazy.

Penny and Primrose agree to have dinner together the next evening, but neither of them shows up. On the following day, they set out separately for the forest surrounding the mansion. Primrose hikes for a while, then sits on a tree trunk, thinking of her mother, who used to make stuffed animals to give to her. Primrose hadn't realized the animals were handmade, and when she eventually found this out, she was disappointed. Standing up, she resumes walking, telling herself a story about "staunch Primrose" (herself) bravely walking through the forest. She stops again, remembering more about her dead father and her "sniveling" mother with her "dripping nose." She considers the difference between reality and imagination, and decides that the imagination is, to her, more real than reality. Finally, she walks out of the forest.

Penny is in a different part of the forest, trying to find the spot where she and Primrose had seen the loathly worm as children. She finds evidence of the worm: "odd sausage-shaped tubes of membrane, containing fragments of hair and bone and other inanimate stuffs." Finding a spot to sit down, Penny reflects on her career as a psychologist, realizing that her encounter with the worm all those years ago "had led her to deal professionally in dreams." She hears a rumbling and thinks it is the worm returning, but she sees nothing. She thinks about her own dead father. After a while, when night falls, she leaves the forest.

Penny and Primrose both return home, but Penny can't stop thinking about the worm, so she travels back to the forest once more, deciding she needs to confront the worm. Finding the same spot, she waits and silently calls to the worm, which she then hears approaching. Penny is ready for whatever happens.

Primrose does not return to the forest, going instead to one of her storytelling sessions in a shopping mall. She smiles at her students and tells them about two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Penny – One of the two main characters, Penny is a young girl at the beginning of the story who is evacuated from London with a group of children to escape the German bombing of London during World War II. She ventures into the woods with her new friend, Primrose, and together the two see **the Thing** in **the forest** (i.e., the loathly worm). They survive the encounter, and by the time Penny is returned to her family, her father has died. Her mother withdraws after this, leaving Penny to feel emotionally abandoned. She grows up to become a child psychologist specializing in children with severe autism. People with autism are often withdrawn, as Penny herself was, and she hopes that, by reaching out to them, she can help them in a way that no one helped her. She returns as an adult to the woods where she once encountered the loathly worm in the hopes that, by confronting the terror from her childhood, she can diminish its power over her and, in doing so, overcome her childhood trauma. Penny is a scientist, someone who relies on observation, data, and her five senses. When she does not encounter the worm on her return to the forest, she returns a second time, determined to draw the worm to her so that she can see it. She finally hears the worm approaching, and in this moment seems to be at peace, her "nerves relaxed" and her "blood slowed." Byatt leaves it unclear whether Penny survives this second meeting with the worm. Because the worm is such a clear symbol of trauma and loss, this ending implies that Penny is ultimately destroyed by her grief surrounding her childhood trauma.

Primrose – One of the two main characters, Primrose is a

young girl at the beginning of the story who is evacuated from London with a group of children to escape the German bombing of London during World War II. She ventures into the woods with her new friend, Penny, and together the two see **the Thing** in **the forest** (i.e., the loathly worm). Like Penny's father, Primrose's father is also killed in the war, and her mother remarries, having five more children whom Primrose has to help raise. This robs her of a carefree childhood—something which the evacuation and her encounter with the loathly worm had already jeopardized. Thus, Primrose grows up to lead a carefree adulthood, working odd jobs and living in an austere apartment. Her one talent is storytelling, and she does this for a living, entertaining children at parties and at a local shopping mall. Her life is only carefree on the surface, however, for Primrose was also traumatized by her childhood, and cannot forget her encounter with the loathly worm. When she returns to the forest as an adult and does not find the worm, this bothers her less than it bothers Penny. Unlike Penny, who feels she must come face-to-face with the worm to overcome her trauma, Primrose relies on her imagination, recasting herself as confident and self-reliant, and the forest as a place of "glamour" rather than terror. After revisiting the forest as an adult, Primrose returns to her life with a sense of closure. In the final scene, she tells a group of children a story about "two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest," thereby opening herself to the possibility that she had only imagined the worm. Primrose overcomes her trauma by looking inward rather than outward, and by relinquishing her need to find a clear answer to the question of whether or not the worm was real.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Alys A younger child whom Penny and Primrose meet before they first venture into the forest. Alys wants to go with them, but Penny and Primrose refuse. Later, as adults, Penny and Primrose remember Alys, believing that the loathly worm killed her.

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.

TRAUMA AND LOSS

Fairy tales, despite being thought of as stories for children, are often full of trauma. Especially in stories that deal with the process of "coming of age," experiences of trauma and loss often spur characters to come to terms with the reality that the world can be a harsh, unforgiving, and scary place. Penny and Primrose deal with literal and figurative loss along their journey to make sense of their encounter with **the Thing** in the **forest**. The characters' pursuit of truth should be healing for them, yet the story's ending suggests that Penny is destroyed by her search, which has become an obsession (she went into the forest *twice*, after all). Byatt seems to encourage confrontation with the losses and traumas of the past while warning that there is no guarantee that such confrontations will ultimately be healing.

Penny and Primrose suffer various traumas in their childhoods. Apart from the general trauma of the war (and their evacuation as a result), each of their fathers dies during the war, leaving their mothers to hold together their fragmented families. However, Byatt suggests Penny and Primrose's mothers each fail their daughters in different ways, setting the stage for the girls' eventual return to the forest as adults. In the wake of her husband's death, Penny's mother "embraced grief, closed her face and her curtains." This withdrawal no doubt reinforces the loneliness and abandonment Penny felt when she was sent to the country mansion during the evacuation, as well as when her father died. Thus, by returning to the forest to confront the loathly worm, Penny is also confronting that feeling of abandonment. Primrose's mother, by contrast, marries again, has numerous children, and lives a hard life, developing "varicose veins and a smoker's cough." Primrose likewise has an unsettled adulthood, doing "this and that," mirroring the ways in which her childhood was unsettled by the war, the loss of her father, and by the appearance of five new siblings. By returning to confront the worm, Primrose is also confronting that feeling of chaos.

Consciously or unconsciously, the loathly worm seems to symbolize, for the characters, the traumas of their childhood. Part of growing up is facing those traumas and overcoming them. Byatt illustrates just how frightening and difficult this process is through Penny and Primrose's fear of the loathly worm—a fear that stays with them as they grow into adults. Penny and Primrose encounter the loathly worm as children. This exposure to something nightmarish leaves them "shaking with dry sobs" and unable to escape the memory of it. The encounter is an external representation of the dread of war and loss—as well as the fear and uncertainty that many children feel when they learn the harsh truths of life. As adults, Penny and Primrose speculate on the death of the younger child, Alys, who had wanted to go into the woods with them. Her death symbolizes the way the loathly worm "finished off" young Penny and Primrose. In other words, if the worm is a symbol of trauma—whether it's the devastation of war or the loss of a parent—then Alys represents the girls' innocence, which the worm destroyed without leaving a trace.

As adults, Penny and Primrose return to the woods in search of the worm. After attempting to suppress their memories of it for

years, the women realize that making that journey again to confront the worm is the only way to overcome the traumatic experiences of their childhoods. They approach the confrontation in different ways, with different results. In this way, Byatt suggests that each person processes trauma in unique ways. Primrose does not meet the worm when she returns to the forest. Instead, her mind wanders as she thinks of toys her mother gave her, and the stories she made up featuring herself and those toys. She leaves feeling a sense of closure. Later, she turns her experience of the worm into a story that she tells to amuse children. Thus, Primrose's approach to trauma is to enter the world of imagination—an approach which seems to heal her. After Penny returns to the forest and does not find the worm, she returns a second time, determined to "look it in the face." She does not merely tell herself a story like Primrose and then walk away. Instead, Penny—a psychologist—feels a need to analyze her childhood trauma closely, firsthand. She needs to see and hear it. Byatt alludes to the risks of this approach through suggesting that Penny, like Alys, is ultimately destroyed by the worm—consumed by the trauma of her childhood.

Encountering the loathly worm is a childhood trauma that Penny and Primrose carry with them into adulthood. They return to the forest to confront the worm as well as their own pasts. Confrontation and closure are, for Byatt's characters, necessary parts of the years-long process of healing from trauma. Byatt cautions, however, that the need for closure can be the thing that prevents healing.

REALITY VS. FANTASY

"The Thing in the Forest" takes place in the real world, but the story has supernatural elements, and therefore blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy. This blurring effect is heightened by Penny and Primrose's frequent questions about whether they really saw anything in the **forest** as children. One of the reasons they return as adults is to clarify for themselves what is real. As they seek to confront the **loathly worm**, they are, on some level, seeking to answer deeper questions for themselves about what is real and what is imagined. Their confusion is often shared by the reader, and is further highlighted by Byatt's use of magical realism.

Byatt describes the forest as a place of mystery and enchantment, a place where reality bends into fantasy and illusion. Penny and Primrose wonder what is real, and after seeing the loathly worm, they repeatedly question what they saw, giving them a motive for returning to the forest as adults. The story's first sentence—"There were once two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest"—establishes that the forest is a place of uncertainty and confusion. This uncertainty provides the main conflict of the story: the girls return to the forest to verify, and confront, a terror from their past. The forest is described as "inviting and mysterious," "a source of attraction and discomfort, shading into terror," and a place where "something that resembled unreality had lumbered into reality." This language suggests that feelings of terror and excitement are often interrelated, just as fantasy often contains elements of reality and vice versa.

When she returns to the forest as an adult, Primrose remembers stories she told herself as a child, which comfort her, leading her to abandon her search for the loathly worm. In the final scene, she begins to tell the children about the worm, relegating it to the realm of fiction, where she has power over it. In this way, she takes advantage of the blurred line between fantasy and reality to triumph over her trauma. Penny is a psychologist specializing in children who are autistic—and who often have trouble sharing their dreams, expressing their imaginations, or reporting on their senses. All of this poses the challenge, for Penny, of determining how to access the realities and experiences of these children. This problem echoes the question that has haunted Penny all these years—the question of what, if anything, she saw in the forest as a child. The need to answer that question is what drives Penny back to the forest as an adult.

The central question of the story is in many ways the question of whether Penny and Primrose actually saw the loathly worm. Byatt uses several elements beyond the women's own uncertainty to further weaken the boundary between fantasy and reality. When Penny and Primrose return to the mansion as adults, they notice that "there was all that history, but no sign that they [...] had ever been there." The thought strengthens the women's resolve to return to the forest, as much in an effort to prove their own reality as in an effort to prove the reality of the worm. Penny and Primrose discuss Alys, "that little one," who they suppose was killed by the worm. They have no evidence she existed, noting that "nobody ever asked where she was or looked for her," yet they *think* she did, just as they think they saw the loathly worm. Thus, Byatt uses Alys's character to blur the boundary between reality and fantasy.

The question of whether the worm is real—and of whether the two girls actually saw it—is ultimately left unresolved. Speaking about the worm, Penny says that "there are things that are real—more real than we are—but mostly we don't cross their paths, or they don't cross ours. Maybe at very bad times we get into their world, or notice what they're doing in ours." In this way, although the worm's reality is in question until the story's end, it remains, in the mind of Penny at least, *more* real than reality—a seeming paradox. Although Primrose seems able to resolve this paradox and leave behind the nagging questions about the reality of what she saw in the forest as a child, for Penny the worm remains not only a source of confusion about the boundary between reality and fantasy, but a reminder that fantasy can have a kind of power over individuals that renders even objective reality irrelevant.

RELATIONSHIPS

Penny and Primrose share a traumatic experience as children, and perhaps as a result they grow up to be lonely adults. Their trauma is worsened, then, by their having no one to lean on, no relationships to enrich their lives. In this way, Byatt depicts relationships as an integral part of life, fundamental to the processes of healing and maturation.

The story begins with children being evacuated from war-torn London—an experience which puts a strain on those children's relationships with their families, as the children would be scared and worried about being away from home. This separation heightens the overall feeling of dread in the story. The narrator notes that Penny and Primrose "did not even know why they were going," and they wondered whether it was "a sort of punishment." Such a strain on the girls' familial relationships put each of them in a more fearful frame of mind, in turn heightening their sense of terror when they eventually encounter the **loathly worm**.

Each girl's father was killed during the war. The girls "found it hard, after the war, to remember these different men." Death is the ultimate separation, and it furthers the girls' sense of loneliness and alienation, which they maintain into adulthood. Their careers, both of which involve building and nurturing relationships with children, are extensions of their personalities, which have been shaped by their individual responses to a shared traumatic experience. Penny is a psychologist who specializes in autistic children; her patients are often uncommunicative and closed off from the world, unable to share their dreams with Penny. She sees her patients as lonely and isolated like herself, and wants to help them. Primrose tells stories to children, so her career requires creativity and imagination, but it is less demanding than Penny's career—which aligns more generally with Primrose's rootless, carefree existence. Yet her stories seem to enable her to form deeper connections with children than Penny's therapy practice. These connections perhaps account for Primrose's ability to move on from her search for the loathly worm as she realizes she no longer needs to confront it.

The story is built around Penny and Primrose's relationship, which consists of just two meetings, each a coincidental one in which they happen to be in the same place at the same time. The friendship is not a strong one, which is no doubt part of the reason why each woman goes into the **forest** alone when they return as adults. The need of each woman to confront the loathly worm on her own reinforces their loneliness as well as the isolating nature of trauma and the experience of recovery. After seeing the worm as children, the two girls walk back to the mansion, after which they "[do] not speak to each other again." Their friendship is a weak alliance, one born of extreme circumstances but not nurtured through time. Byatt suggests that the girls' relationship is insubstantial—as tenuous as their memories of the worm itself. As adults, Penny and Primrose discuss their experience as children, with a goal of making sure that what they remember really happened. They are comforted by the assurance that they are able to give one another. "Well, we know we're not mad," Primrose says after their conversation. Yet they don't become true friends, as evidenced by the fact that, although they make dinner plans for the following night, neither of them shows up. The uncertain nature of their girlhood friendship has extended into adulthood, reinforcing their feelings of alienation and dread, and giving each one the incentive to return to the forest to confirm her own experience and confront her own terror alone.

A network of strong relationships can be an asset when dealing with loss and hardship. Penny and Primrose each felt abandoned as children in different ways, and they carry that sense of loneliness with them into their adult lives. While Penny is plagued by feelings of alienation until the very end of the story, Primrose manages to find human connection through storytelling, and Byatt suggests that she ultimately recovers from the horror of witnessing the Thing in the forest, whereas Penny seems to implode under the weight of her emotions and loneliness. In this way, Byatt seems to confirm the essential nature of relationships and human connection to the process of growth and self-fulfillment.

SYMBOLS

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

THE THING IN THE FOREST (THE LOATHLY WORM)

In the **forest**, Penny and Primrose encounter a horrible creature, which they later learn is called "the loathly worm." Immediately, the worm seems to be a clear symbol of the war and all its horrors, which the girls were sent to the mansion to escape. The memory of the Thing haunts the girls throughout their childhoods and into adulthood, underscoring the traumatic effect that wartime can have on a young person—even a young person who is relatively insulated from the ravages of a brutal war. With the worm, Byatt seems to be saying that the War was so overwhelmingly awful that no one could escape it, no matter where they hid. As adults, when Penny and Primrose return to the forest to look for the Thing again, Byatt makes it clear that their journey is as much about "the worm" as it is about confronting the trauma they experienced in childhood, having both lost their fathers to the war. As such, the Thing in the forest is not merely a symbol for the horrors of war, but for trauma more generally—and the ways in which, through time, it can easily become an all-consuming, formless thing that defies any objective understanding and destroys lives.

FOREST

Byatt describes the forest in which Penny and Primrose encounter **the Thing** as a place characterized by mystery, where "dark and light came and went, inviting the mysterious, as the wind pushed clouds across the face of the sun." The girls wander into this mysterious forest in the midst of a chaotic and confusing wartime evacuation, and have an unexpected and life-altering traumatic experience there. In this way, the forest represents the unknown, but it also symbolizes the unconscious as a dark and difficult-to-access place where the line between objective reality and subjective experience is thoroughly blurred. This is the mysterious realm to which the young girls must return as adults to confront their childhood trauma and to begin to process what they have for so long repressed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Little Black Book of Stories* published in 2003.

The Thing in the Forest Quotes

❝ There were once two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest.

Related Characters: Primrose, Penny

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This first line in the story establishes what will be the central question of the story: did Penny and Primrose actually encounter a terrifying creature in the forest? Over the course of the girls' lives, as they mature into adults, they will struggle with the question of whether their encounter with the thing in the forest actually took place. The seemingly unanswerable nature of this simple question speaks to the ways in which traumatic events can be so utterly shocking and incomprehensible that their very reality is suddenly called into question. In this way, the sighting of the thing in the forest parallels the trauma of the war and the associated death of the girls' fathers. While these traumas prove undeniably real, Primrose eventually comes to terms with the fact that the girls' experience of encountering the thing in the forest may only have taken place in their imaginations.

❝ They remembered the thing they had seen in the forest, on the contrary, in the way you remember those very few dreams—almost all nightmares—that have the quality of life itself. (Though what are dreams if not life itself?)

Related Characters: Primrose, Penny

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Although this story takes place in the real world, its supernatural elements blur the boundary between reality and fantasy. After their encounter with the thing in the forest, Penny and Primrose do not dismiss the worm as a figment of their imagination. They believe, or want to believe, that it was real—as real and terrifying as the war from which they have been evacuated. A.S. Byatt uses the appearance of the worm to comment on the peculiar ways the human mind processes grief and dread. Although Byatt does not make it clear whether or not the worm actually exists, she suggests that trauma—such as the loss of a loved one, or the ravages of war—can blur the boundary between reality and fantasy.

❝ I think, I think there are things that are real—more real than we are—but mostly we don't cross their paths, or they don't cross ours. Maybe at very bad times we get into their world, or notice what they are doing in ours.

Related Characters: Penny (speaker), Primrose

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

When the worm appeared to Penny and Primrose as children, it was nightmarish and unreal-seeming, though

they did believe it was real. The girls spend years trying to heal from the trauma of what they saw. As adults, they consider the difference between reality and fantasy. They know their story of the worm would seem unbelievable, and the likely explanation is that they imagined it. Yet they are unwilling to dismiss their encounter with the worm as purely imaginary. Penny speaks for both women when she insists that the worm had become as real to them as anything else in their lives, as evidenced by their lingering horror at its memory. Byatt is testing the very boundary of fantasy and reality, prompting the reader to ask themselves whether they believe that the worm may have been real. Ultimately, Byatt suggests that just because something is not literally true does not make it any less true for those who experienced (or believe they experienced) it.

"Sometimes I think that thing finished me off," said Penny to Primrose, a child's voice rising in a woman's gullet, arousing a little girl's scared smile which wasn't a smile on Primrose's face.

Related Characters: Penny (speaker), Primrose

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Of the two women, Penny struggles more to come to terms with her memories of the worm. She is determined to prove that encountering the worm was a literal occurrence, one that took place in the world she can see, hear, and touch. Both girls had difficult lives after leaving the country mansion as their fathers were killed and their families fell apart. Penny especially suffered because her mother withdrew, closing herself off as a source of comfort. Penny acknowledges that this trauma, in addition to the loss of her father and the memory of the worm, nearly overwhelmed her. Her decision to return to the forest to confront the worm again is the sort of redemptive quest often present in fantasy stories.

She believed in Father Christmas, and the discovery that her mother had made the toys, the vanishing of magic, had been a breathtaking blow. She could not be grateful for the skill and the imagination, so uncharacteristic of her flirtatious mother.

Related Characters: Primrose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

As an adult, Primrose works as a children's storyteller. She is a woman who relies on her imagination, not only for her livelihood but to help her cope with emotional difficulties. In fact, she had been relying on her imagination since childhood, creating stories for the stuffed animals that her mother made but which she thought were brought by Father Christmas. She sees her mother as unimaginative and therefore ordinary, and discovering that this insipid woman was responsible for her beloved animals was disillusioning. Imagination is how Primrose processes her world. She sees herself as brave, unlike her mother, and she relies on this self-image of bravery to take her back into the forest as an adult to confront the loathly worm—something her mother would surely never be able to do.

Primrose knew that glamour and the thing they had seen, brilliance and the ashen stink, came from the same place.

Related Characters: Primrose

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

The place where "brilliance and the ashen stink" both come from is the human mind, or imagination. The stories Primrose has always conjured about herself and her world are brilliant, presenting a contrast to her dreary and difficult life. The worm, whether it is literal or conjured, represents the dark lengths the mind will go to ("the stink") in its effort to process traumatic events such as the war and the death of Primrose's father. The worm, when she encountered it as a child, seemed like something out of a nightmare, but the dread and fear it left behind were all-too-real. Primrose

returns to the forest as an adult and lets her imagination do what she has depended on it to do for so long: help her come to terms with the difficulties of life.

> It was the encounter with the Thing that had led her to deal professionally in dreams. Something that resembled unreality had lumbered into reality, and she had seen it.

Related Characters: Penny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

The boundary between the real world and the world of imagination is one of this story's main themes. Byatt's story does not take place in a world of pure fantasy. Instead, she has her fantastic creation, the loathly worm, intrude upon the real world in much the same way that dreams do. The trauma of the war and Penny's collapsed family *plus* her encounter with the worm was nearly too much for her to handle. As an adult, she feels driven to help other children who similarly struggle with difficult lives. As she engages these children in therapy, she is offering them a connection she wishes someone had offered her when she needed it most.

> When it came, she would look it in the face, she would see what it was. She clasped her hands loosely in her lap. Her nerves relaxed. Her blood slowed. She was ready.

Related Characters: Alys , Penny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Penny is a scientist. Unlike Primrose, who relies on imagination to overcome her trauma, Penny relies on her five senses, which is why she feels compelled to return to the forest a second time to see and hear the worm. These lines reveal that Penny hears and smells the worm but not that she *sees* it. (Recall that Primrose does not see it either when she returns to the forest.) These lines—which are the final words writtena bout Penny—suggest that Penny, like Alys, is ultimately destroyed by the worm, though the destruction may not be literal. Penny may have simply surrendered mentally and emotionally to her grief, not unlike the children who are her patients.

> Primrose sat on the edge of the fountain. She had decided what to do. She smiled her best, most comfortable smile, and adjusted her golden locks. Listen to me, she told them, and I'll tell you something amazing, a story that's never been told before.

Related Characters: Primrose (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

Though she does not encounter the worm again, adult Primrose leaves the forest feeling a sense of closure. She realizes that she does not need to see and hear the worm for it to be real to her, just as dreams do not need to be literal occurrences to exert power over a person. In these final lines of the story, Primrose turns her memory of the worm into a children's story. Her approach to trauma is to enter the world of imagination—an approach which seems to heal her. She characterizes the story as "amazing" rather than "scary" to signal her victory over the worm and her readiness to, as she said to Penny over tea, "get on with things."

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 THING IN THE FOREST

Penny and Primrose are two girls who are evacuated with a group of children to a mansion in the English countryside during World War II. They are evacuated to escape the German bombing of London (i.e., the Blitz), which took place in the early 1940s. The children are described as a ragtag bunch, with scuffed shoes and scraped knees, and carrying toys and dolls as items of comfort, most likely to forestall the terror they must feel.

The war is the event that the girls are literally escaping, but they will spend the rest of their lives trying to escape it figuratively, as well, as they struggle to cope with the traumatic experience of leaving their families and encountering the Thing in the forest.

Penny is tall, thin, and pale—possibly older than Primrose, who is plump with curly blond hair. They become friends on the train during the evacuation, discussing their bewilderment over the situation, wondering "whether it was a sort of holiday or a sort of punishment." The train is hot and dirty, and as it passes through unfamiliar countryside, the children feel the dread of not knowing where they are going or when they will return. The narrator compares them to Hansel and Gretel, two fairy tale children who were likewise led into a strange environment with no promise that they would return.

Feeling alone and scared, Penny and Primrose latch on to each other. The nascent friendship becomes a way to combat the feelings of isolation and dread they feel due to being evacuated under the threat of bombs and separated from their families. By comparing the girls to Hansel and Gretel, well-known fairy tale characters, Byatt signals that this story is a modern take on the fairy tale genre, with strong elements of fantasy and allegory.

The girls arrive, along with a group of many other children, at the mansion: a big, eerie place surrounded by a **forest**. The mansion has "imposing stairs," shuttered windows, and "carved griffins and unicorns on its balustrade." Penny and Primrose are anxious and scared, thinking of themselves as orphans. They go through the motions of getting ready for bed, eating a meager supper and settling down in military cots with "shoddy blankets." Some of the children cry themselves to sleep that first night.

As the girls settle down for the night, they further reflect on their isolation and fear. The trauma of their separation from their families and the frightening atmosphere of the mansion begin to affect them, setting the stage for their nightmarish encounter with the Thing. Penny and Primrose's story is quite singular in nature, but by grouping them together with other evacuees in this way, Byatt shows that the trauma they face is unfortunately all too common in wartime.

The next morning, after breakfast, Penny and Primrose go outdoors with the other children, who play ball and other games. Instead of joining these games, the girls decide to explore the **forest**. A younger child, Alys—pretty, with pale blue eyes and golden curls, but "barely out of nappies" (i.e., diapers)—wants to go with them, but they tell her no, saying she is too little. Alys persists, promising not to be a burden, the way younger kids do who idolize older ones, but Penny and Primrose refuse.

By refusing to let Alys accompany them, Penny and Primrose unwittingly limit the impact of meeting the Thing to just the two of them. This makes them more isolated later in life, as the experience proves to be a traumatic one that only they share. This refusal also creates a unique bond between Penny and Primrose that enables Byatt to contrast the way the two confront their trauma as adults.

Creeping into the **forest**, the girls vow not to go too far, wanting to stay in sight of the gate. The forest is thick and menacing, paradoxically "inviting and mysterious." Suddenly, they hear a "crunching, a crackling, a crushing, a heavy thumping, combining with threshing and thrashing," plus a host of other disturbing noises. They also smell a stench like that of "maggoty things at the bottom of untended dustbins, blocked drains, mixed with the smell of bad eggs, and of rotten carpets and ancient polluted bedding."

Byatt's description of the approach of the Thing creates an atmosphere of unreality and terror, both of which make it hard for Penny and Primrose to accept the existence of what they see. The incomprehensibility and horrid nature of the Thing speaks to the girls' feelings of confusion, fear, and shock at being sent from their homes due to the approach of the war.

Finally, Penny and Primrose catch sight of the source of the smell coming toward them through the woods, and they crouch behind a log so as to remain unseen. **The thing** has a face like a rubbery mask on top of a "monstrous turnip," which is "the color of flayed flesh" and wears an expression of "pure misery." Its most prominent feature is its enormous mouth, and its face is low to the ground as it trundles through the **forest** and toward the girls on short, squat arms. The girls watch as the giant caterpillar-like creature comes crushing through the foliage, destroying everything in its path with its very large, "turd"-like body, which appears to be made of "rank meat." When it encounters large trees or rocks, rather than navigating around them the thing splits into two or three distinct worms before rejoining as one body. All the while, the thing lets out a pained moaning sound "among its other burblings and belchings." The girls stare at it with "horrified fascination" as it passes.

Laying eyes on the Thing intensifies the girls' fright. They can scarcely believe such a creature exists. The destructive nature of the creature as it devours things in its path parallels the destructive nature of war, subtly foreshadowing the deaths of the girls' fathers and the unravelling of their families as a consequence of the war. And yet, Byatt writes that the girls look on with a strange mixture of terror and fascination, suggesting that even the most horrible of events—such as war—can have a dark and undeniable allure in people's minds, provoking excitement and fascination despite the very real potential such events contain for violence and tragedy.

Penny and Primrose huddle together, shaking as they watch **the thing** slither away. They exit the **forest** wordlessly and without looking behind them, worried that the mansion will have been "transmogrified," or will have vanished altogether. But when they arrive they find the other children still on the lawn, continuing to play, oblivious to what the girls have just experienced. They don't discuss what they saw. The next day, all the children are sent to temporary homes for the rest of the evacuation. Penny goes to a parsonage, Primrose to a dairy farm. They can't forget what they saw, remembering the sight and sound and smell of the creature, as well as the mixture of excitement and terror they felt. They do not dismiss the creature as a nightmare, focusing on it instead as "a real thing in a real place."

This marks the beginning of Penny and Primrose's lifelong struggle to make sense of what has happened to them, as they struggle to accept what they have seen. When they exit the forest expecting to find that the world as they know it has disappeared or transformed, it is an indication of the ways in which a traumatic experience such as wartime evacuation (or seeing a ghastly giant worm in the forest) can unground a person and alter their relationship to reality completely. Their unwillingness or inability to discuss the Thing, even with each other, deepens their feelings isolation and dread, as does their sudden departure from the country mansion.

After the evacuation, the girls each return to their families, which the war has altered. Primrose's father is killed on a troop carrier in the Far East, and afterwards her mother remarries, having five more children. Primrose's mother's health suffers; she develops varicose veins and a smoker's cough. Penny's father, a member of the Auxiliary Fire Service, dies in a fire in the East India Docks on the Thames. Her mother withdraws afterwards, becoming a shut-in.

Each girl lost her father during her exile in the country mansion. These losses destabilize each of their families, further exacerbating the transformative and destructive effects of the war on their lives. That instability, coupled with their frightening encounter with the Thing in the forest, constitutes a complex compound of early childhood traumas that each girl spends her life trying to overcome.

The years pass, and Penny, a good student, becomes a child psychologist, "working with the abused, the displaced, and the disturbed." Primrose, by contrast, struggles in school due to having to babysit her younger siblings, and holds a series of odd jobs before settling down as a well-loved children's storyteller, with a corner to herself in a local shopping mall. There, she keeps an eye on other people's children, "offering them just a frisson of fear and terror" in her stories. The narrator notes that Primrose "got fat as Penny got thin. Neither of them married."

The girls respond to the instability of their families in different ways, leading them to different career paths and lifestyles. Yet they are united by the experience they shared. Byatt uses the girls' seemingly diverging trajectories into adulthood to suggest that there are different methods of overcoming trauma, and nearly identical circumstances can be processed very differently by different people—leading to very different results.

The story picks up again in 1984. The country mansion that had housed the evacuees during the war has been turned into a museum. Penny and Primrose, now adults, each turn up for a tour of the museum on the same day by pure coincidence, each unaware that the other is there. Both of their mothers have recently died. The women have not spoken at all since the day they saw **the thing** in the **forest**.

Though they may not be consciously aware of the reasons behind their trip, Penny and Primrose are each drawn back to the site of the trauma that so radically changed their lives (whether that's the war, or the sighting of the Thing). The return is a necessary first step in the healing process, and it mirrors the ways in which people constantly revisit the traumas of the past in their minds, if not by physically traveling to revisit the places where the events occurred.

Penny and Primrose recognize each other almost immediately when they find themselves side by side, looking at an old book on display in the mansion museum—a "nineteenth-century mock-medieval" volume with pictures of a knight lifting his sword to slay something not quite visible on the page. A description next to the book tells of the **Loathly Worm**, a giant creature that, according to legend, had terrorized the countryside around the mansion. Various people over the years had tried to kill the worm, but it had always come back, having the ability, like garden worms, to grow new body parts if divided.

By stumbling across what they believe to be evidence of the Thing's existence, Penny and Primrose take the next step in the healing process: naming the object of their terror. This makes it seem less mysterious and more real despite its fantastic qualities and legendary status. Making the Thing more real gives Penny and Primrose the courage to return to the forest for a second confrontation.

Delighted to see each other again, the women go out for tea. They talk about their jobs, being unmarried, and their parents. They talk about the mansion, commenting on how, despite all the history on display, there are no indications that the place was ever used to house evacuees. Finally, they discuss **the thing** they once saw in the **forest**. "Did you ever wonder," Primrose asks, "if we really saw it?" Penny replies, "Never for a moment." They talk about their horror that day, and how it "did [them] no good."

Small talk helps the women get reacquainted, though it does not strengthen their bond. Instead, it seems to further alienate them. Turning their discussion to the loathly worm is important because it makes the fantastic creature seem more real, and it constitutes the next step in the healing process: talking about the trauma.

Penny comments that the thing "finished [her] off," prompting Primrose to remember Alys, the child who had begged to go with them into the **forest**. Recalling how they never saw Alys after that moment, and how no one ever asked about her or looked for her, they conclude that **the thing** must have killed her. Reliving their encounter with the worm reassures them that, as Primrose says, they are "not mad, anyway."

Byatt uses the character of Alys to further blur the boundary between reality and fantasy. Thus, discussing Alys helps the women confirm their memories of the girl, which is one more step in overcoming their trauma because, even though it may seem like an insignificant detail, each woman feels less isolated by realizing they have this memory in common.

Penny and Primrose agree to have dinner together next evening, but neither of them keeps the appointment. They don't see the purpose of further reminiscences. Instead, on the following day, they set out separately for the **forest** surrounding the mansion. Primrose hikes for a while, then sits on a tree trunk, thinking of her mother, who used to make stuffed animals to give to her. Her mother didn't tell stories, as a mother might be expected to do, but she was "good with her fingers," which Primrose sees as an unimpressive talent. It ruined the magic of the animals when she discovered her mother had made them.

Primrose's reflections on her mother reveal how her mother's behavior helped destabilize the family, contributing to the emotional trauma that Primrose must overcome. With her father dead and her mother underwhelming, Primrose was left to figure things out on her own, contributing to her feelings of isolation. Feeling alone, Primrose turned to her imagination—finding it disappointing when she learned that the animals her mother had made were not "real," but manmade. In this way, Primrose shows that she prefers the inventions of her own imagination to the cold facts of reality.

Standing up, Primrose resumes walking, telling herself a story about "staunch Primrose" (herself) bravely walking through the **forest**. She stops again, remembering more about the death of her father and her "sniveling" mother with her "dripping nose," and she considers the difference between reality and imagination, characterized by her talent (storytelling) versus that of her mother (knitting). She decides that her memory and imagination are more real to her than where she actually lives (a lonely apartment "above a Chinese takeaway") or other elements of her life. Then she leaves the forest.

Primrose takes her next step in the healing process, a step that is unique to her. She inverts the normal order of reality and fantasy by deciding that her imagination (and her vision of herself as brave) is just as real, if not more real, than objective reality. This becomes her method for dealing with her trauma, as it enables her to shape and define herself by crafting her own identity. She does not need to see or hear the loathly worm again. All she ever needed to heal was inside herself, and she finally taps into this wellspring of strength and self-reliance.

Penny is in a different part of the **forest**, trying to find the spot where she and Primrose had seen **the loathly worm** as children. She finds evidence of the worm, "odd sausage-shaped tubes of membrane, containing fragments of hair and bone and other inanimate stuffs." Finding a spot to sit down, Penny reflects on her career as a psychologist, realizing that her encounter with the worm all those years ago "had led her to deal professionally in dreams." Penny is a scientist, "drawn to the invisible forces that [move] in molecules," and she therefore has to see and hear things to find them real. She hears a rumbling and thinks it is the worm returning, but she sees nothing. She thinks about her dead father. After a while, when night falls, she leaves the forest.

Primrose appreciates the powers of the imagination in a way that enables her to move on with her life without answering the question of whether the Thing was real or imagined. In this way, the imagination is an integral tool and resource in her process of healing. Byatt contrasts this imaginative approach with Penny's need to see and hear the worm. Penny feels that if she can confirm with her senses that the worm is real rather than fantasy, this knowledge will help her to heal, but this rigid approach to processing the traumas of childhood proves self-defeating.

Penny and Primrose take the train back to the city. They do not sit together. When they get out at the station, they see each other at a distance but don't speak. They stare at each other through the "black imagined veil that grief or pain or despair hangs over the visible world," thinking that they see in each other's faces the same misery they once saw in the face of **the worm**. Then they part ways.

Seeing each other again does not make Penny and Primrose feel closer. It does not strengthen their bond. Instead, it reinforces in each of them the need to stick to her own path of recovery. For Penny, this means rationality and empiricism trump all else in the process of confronting and surmounting challenging emotional issues, while for Primrose, the imagination plays a key and liberating role.

Penny tries to see patients again, but she can't stop thinking about **the worm**. She discovers that "the black veil had somehow become part of her vision," and feels that she needs to see the worm, that it has become more real than the faces of her patients— more real, even, than herself. So she travels back to the **forest**. Finding the spot where she and Primrose had encountered the worm 40 years earlier, Penny waits and silently calls the Thing. She hears and smells it approaching. She thinks that when it arrives, she will look it in the face and see what it is. She is relaxed and ready.

Penny allows herself to be overtaken by her need to see and hear the worm again, which she believes is the only way she can move out from behind the "black veil" of her trauma. Whether she survives this second encounter is not stated, and the reader is left to speculate. Perhaps this second encounter is not literal but rather a symbolic description of a woman being destroyed by her grief and inability to rise above trauma.

Primrose returns to her life, and her job at the shopping mall "like a crystal palace" where she tells stories to children. The children enjoy juice and cookies, and they are described as being of "all colors." Primrose smiles at the children and begins a story about "two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest."

Unlike Penny, who may have been overcome by her grief, Primrose seems to take the final step toward healing: she incorporates the worm into her stories, and in this way exerts a degree of agency and control over the thing that once dominated her imagination.

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