

“Compare the parents in ‘Your Shoes’ and ‘Growing Up’ and what they learn about themselves.”

‘Your Shoes’ by Michèle Roberts and ‘Growing Up’ by Joyce Cary are two very different short stories. They both, however, involve one parent who seems to be in a state of uncertainty regarding their child or children. I feel that, having studied both, each parent needs to learn something about their own lives in order to apply the understanding to their jobs as parents. Roberts and Cary both present the children in their short stories as individual human beings. It has come as a surprise to both parents that their children need to be understood and that they might actually need to get to know their offspring as people. In the case of the mother in ‘Your Shoes’, however, this might actually be too late.

Beginning to read ‘Your Shoes’, the reader is aware that the narration is in the style of a letter. It is, in fact, revealed that a mother is writing to her daughter who has run away from home. She writes: “You just went off, just ran out of the house in the middle of the night, and left me.” This means that she of course cannot verbally express her feelings in person (“There’s no point really in writing this because it can’t reach you...I don’t know where you are”). This links in with the father in ‘Growing Up’ - a successful businessman and doting father; as shown in “Robert Quick, coming home after a business trip...He had missed his two small girls”. Note that the girls are described within Mr Quick’s narration as being rather young. It is established later on that they are in fact twelve and thirteen years of age. Cary goes on to tell of how Jenny and Kate, the two girls, greet their father dismissively but quickly become aggressive towards both him and their canine pet, through fighting and pranks. Mr. Quick’s “garden was a wilderness”, and this garden is used as a motif for the wild behaviour of the children he is about to experience. He is unable to tell his daughters of the concern he feels towards their newly acquired violent behaviour because of initially their young age, and also because of his own shock and embarrassment. It seems as though Mr. Quick’s parenting skills would benefit from a significant amount of discipline being introduced, as he does not punish his daughters for being destructive and violent.

The teenage daughter in ‘Your Shoes’ has left home mainly due to an argument with her father, who in the story is conveyed as a very distant and shadowy authority figure. As the story relates mainly to the girl’s mother, phrases and mentions such as “Your father will be home soon,” and “Your father didn’t mean it when he told you those things...” are somewhat rare. This level of appearance is similar to that of the mother in ‘Growing up’ – we cannot gain a clear understanding of her personality as she is kept out of the main storyline. References such as “Robert Quick...found a note from his wife. She would be back at four,” give the impression of a rather mysterious and anonymous figure. Both of the short stories seem to centre around one particular parent, as I am sure was intended by Roberts and Cary.

In one way or another, both parents appear to be feeling a deep sense of betrayal (“You left me” and “...something new had broken into his old simple and happy relation with his daughters; they had suddenly receded from him into a world of their own...”). The mother in ‘Your Shoes’ regrets never having bonded sufficiently with her only daughter and that her leaving home is a rejection of her parental love and effort. Previously, though, she had believed in her ability to acquaint herself with all aspects of the girl’s personality and lifestyle: “I thought I knew you...No secret places, no hidey-holes, nothing in you I couldn’t see.” The fact that she feels she “didn’t really know you at all” causes the reader to sympathise with the mother herself. The reader is informed rather fully about the previous underlying problems in the family, and the fact that to be given another chance at letting her daughter know to what extent she is loved would be to stabilise the mother’s state of mind. Similarly to Robert Quick’s, the mother’s confusion is evident to the reader, and we are gradually informed that her mental state is somewhat unstable. She feels that “if I wrap my arms around myself and hold tight it keeps the pain in.” This of course creates a link in the reader’s mind relating to insanity and the shape of a straitjacket – both arms wrapped around the body, so that physical damage to oneself or another person is prevented.

‘Growing Up’, however, emphasises a father’s momentary regret at no longer having dependent and helpless yet sweet and loving daughters. Cary describes his realisation that he must let go of the past (“She’s growing up – and so am I.”) and allow his daughters to grow up and become young women (“She was going to be an exciting woman, strong in all her feelings, intelligent, reflective”). A prominent focus in both stories is of the past, and events that have made a difference previously. The parents are learning that in order to be good providers and sources of reliance for their children, they must look to the future and decide upon the needs of their daughters and themselves. Michèle Roberts, especially, concentrates upon the human need for a woman to be maternally close to her female offspring, and the emotional turmoil created when it is felt that she has gone wrong.

Another difference between the two short stories is that whilst Mr. Quick will be able to happily see his daughters flourish and grow, the mother in ‘Your Shoes’ has run out of time to be what she believes is a good parent. The quotation “Your father will be home soon - I’ve locked the bedroom door so that he can’t get in” and the fact that she is curled up on her daughter’s bed in the foetal position indicate that she is beyond help and the only people who have caused her this anxiety and depression are those who can once again bring her out of it. I think that Roberts is attempting to stress the fact that bitter memories and regretful past experiences have changed the narrator’s intended style of mothering (“I dreamed of my mother last night...There was so much I wanted to say to her and now it’s too late”). The role of a pair of white trainers in the story presents several ideas. One is a symbol of all things lost – deteriorating marital and maternal relationships have been the causes of insanity. The white colouring of the trainers also links to the theme of insanity – the white gowns and clothes worn by psychiatric patients. The theme of ‘white’ is maintained throughout the story. The daughters in ‘Growing Up’ are younger, and there do not appear to be any unstable emotional foundations...simply a lack of castigation. Having hurriedly learned of his paternal misunderstanding, Robert

Quick, if he chooses, is still able to see his daughters grow up in a calm, ladylike manner. As Roberts intended, this is more than can be said for the parenting in “Your Shoes”. Roberts and Cary have, overall, created two seemingly dissimilar characters; however when the short stories are studied several similar misunderstandings become apparent. Some of the pain caused by insufficient parenting is too deep to erase, other examples can change. Both characters have much to learn about both themselves and their children.