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Initiation in "The Bear" and "A&P"  
Short paper assignment on Initiation, Alienation, etc.  
EN 152, MWF 8:00  
Assignment Due: 3/28/99  
Passed In: 3/29/99

*[please note that the thesis statement and topic sentences are in **boldface** type]*

**In the fiction we've read in class, the initiation theme usually involves a journey from innocence to knowledge.** The main character goes on a journey, loses innocence, and gains knowledge—often moving from childlike dependence to adult independence. The main character is often guided by a mentor in this initiation. Initiation can also be a heroic act, in which the main character makes a sacrifice or becomes aware of a larger, more complex existence. The initiate is introduced to the mysteries of life.

**The journey almost always portrays inner struggle, often symbolized by abandonment of totem objects, which can symbolize either the old way of life or the ego.** The initiate has to give up something to get something bigger. "The Bear," tells of the magical rituals of the hunt and clearly presents the shedding of these symbolic, totem images. Sam Fathers helps Ike realize that he must put aside his metal, man-made implements because—as an initiate—he cannot see the Bear without them. When he complains to Sam that he has not seen the Bear yet, Sam reveals to him, "'It's the gun,' Sam said." He first abandons the gun:

He had left the gun; of his own will and relinquishment he had adapted not a gambit, not a choice, but a condition...all the old rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated. He would not even be afraid....

Later, he leaves behind the compass and watch as well: "It was the watch, the compass, the stick...he hung the watch and compass carefully on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and relinquished completely to it." Faulkner keeps repeating the word, "relinquished," indicating a giving-up. The objects become symbolic of both an inner, spiritual struggle and the fear that Ike abandons. This fear is partly fear of leaving

what is known and comfortable and voyaging to the unknown, and is the partly the reluctant abandonment of ego. According to Joseph Campbell, all initiates undergo this. They move from one level to another, undergoing a “death and a resurrection.” They are brought forth into a more adult, less egoistic condition.

**In the story, “A&P,” Sammy’s symbols of initiation are the clothing he casts off: “I pull the bow at the back of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders.”** Completing the ritual of separation, he states: “The bow tie is theirs, if you ever wondered...”

**The shedding of objects is symbolic of a larger casting off.** When Sammy leaves the protective “parenthood” of the A&P, he states, “...I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.” Sammy is moving toward the responsibility for his own decisions, and away from the literal apron strings of the A&P. Ironically, he sees Lengel move into his place in the slot. Perhaps Updike is commenting on the mechanistic dehumanization of today’s social system—people become interchangeable parts.

**From Joseph Campbell’s point of view, Sammy could be following his bliss as he moves away from living according to someone else’s program, in a especially a system that dehumanizes people.**

Campbell repeatedly stresses the historical need for humans to live “authentic” lives that manifest vitality. One can see from Sammy’s comments and attitude, at the beginning of the story, that he has grown beyond the need to be enfolded by the A&P and will either make his move or wither. Campbell states that all transformations involve “a death and a resurrection.” Sammy must “die” to his life at the A&P and come forth into a more mature, responsible world if he is to survive.

**Ike McCaslin also gradually gives up his dependence on Sam Fathers and bases his knowledge on his own experience.** He too, learns to follow his own way: “...by his fourteenth year, he was a better woodsman than most grown men with more....” Although he still listens to Sam, the story is really a tale

about his achievement of independence through learning. After Faulkner states that Ike is a woodsman at fourteen, he states, three paragraphs later:

He sat on a log, shaking and trembling as if he had never seen the woods before nor anything that ran them, wondering with incredulous amazement how he could have forgotten the very thing which Sam Fathers had told him and which the bear itself had proved the next day and had now returned after three years to reaffirm.

Throughout the story, Ike goes through constant discovery. Faulkner calls the Bear Ike's "college." He finally graduates from "college" by making the decision not to kill the Bear.

**Mentors point out the direction. They do not impose their own canned philosophy on their students or children.** Sam Fathers, as his name implies, is really an unofficial "foster" father to Ike. Like a true mentor, he knows that Ike's experience must *not* be a carbon copy of his own. In the video we saw in class, Joseph Campbell reinforces this idea, when he talks to Bill Moyers about mentors. He tells Moyers that he has to find his own way of dealing with the dragon. Campbell indicates that he can only show Moyers navigation tricks. Moyers must find his own path to his bliss, Campbell states, otherwise he would be living out Campbell's program.

**From "A&P" we learn that mentors are not always benevolent.** Lengel, although not as malevolent as Abner Snopes in "Barn Burning" still tries to retard Sammy's progress toward independence. He tries to hold Sammy under the protective sphere of the A&P. He even uses tricks, threats that play upon Sammy's childhood fear of authority, to impede his move toward adulthood:

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a been a friend of my parents for years. "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad...You'll feel this for the rest of your life."

Darth Vader, in the film Star Wars, says, “Join with me Luke, and learn the power of the dark side.” Lengel too, although not as cosmic, does not want his foster child to escape his grasp and the grasp of the system he represents. Sammy has begun to break away from the safety of the protective umbrella of the A&P.

**The journey of initiation is the hero’s journey into life’s mysteries.** All the characters express a sense of profound change as a result of the knowledge that comes from their own experience, not the knowledge based on society’s slogans or on the second-hand ideologies of systems.

**Sammy, Ike, and most of the other characters in the stories we have read, ultimately give up much of their ego-involvement.** Sammy starts to empathize with the customers, even though he is limited only to the pretty girls at first. Instead of seeing them as pigs in a chute, Sammy resents the embarrassing way Lengel has dehumanized them, and acts in flagrant disregard of his own selfish interests to call Lengel’s attention to the fact. Ike risks his life for a dog, not exactly an egocentric act, either. Both main characters reassert their communion with humanity by their unselfishness, and reflect a theme common to the other stories that we have read in this course.