



“The Scarlet Ibis”

Notes to help you study by...

English 9 Honors

Essential Questions

- How does fear shape our decisions & actions? How is the narrator of “Ibis” motivated by fear?
- Can evil be determined by a (single) act of cruelty? Is the narrator evil?
- How does Hurst make a statement about our obligations to our fellow man (brotherhood)?
- Can a good act be considered noble if it was committed with impure intentions?

The Basics: Key Literary Elements

- **Protagonist: Narrator (Doodle's brother)**
- **Antagonist: Doodle**
- **Conflicts: man v man; man v self**
- **POV: 1st person limited (Brother)**
- **Setting: Coastal North Carolina, 1912-1918**
- **Significant Techniques: figurative language, symbolism, flashback**
- **Figurative Lang: similes, metaphors, color imagery (red = blood)**

Characters: Brother

- The lead protagonist of the story & narrator
- Not given a name; only referred to as “Brother”
- 6 years old when Doodle is born
- Sense of pride in his ability to run, jump, and climb – wants a brother to share in these activities
- Ashamed of Doodle’s limitations & regularly taunts him

Characters: Brother

- **Though he loves Doodle, the love is tainted with cruelty and embarrassment**
- **Reluctantly allows Doodle to accompany him; pulls him in his go-cart**
- **Ashamed at having a crippled sibling, Brother secretly teaches Doodle to walk.**
- **Not enough, he pushes him to do more**
- **Eventually, he breaks into a run leaving Doodle trailing**

Characters: Brother

- **Doodle overstrains himself and dies of a heart attack**
- **Brother weeps over his fallen brother and recognizes the symbolic link between Doodle and the beautiful, rare scarlet ibis that had fallen dead from a tree in the family garden earlier that day.**

Characters: Doodle

- **The mentally and physically challenged younger brother of the narrator**
- **Given the name, William Armstrong because it will look good on a tombstone (as he wasn't expected to live past his infancy).**
- **Eventually given the nickname Doodle (after a doodle-bug because of his habit of crawling backwards) by Brother**

Characters: Doodle



Characters: Doodle

- From the first, Doodle is a disappointment to his family, especially to his brother, because he can only lie on a rubber sheet and crawl backwards.
- Everyone expects him to die, but Doodle defies them all and survives, becoming a loving boy with a strong attachment to Brother.

Characters: Doodle

- **Doodle is pulled around in a go-cart by Brother until Brother teaches Doodle to walk. This achievement, however, seems more important to Brother than it does to Doodle.**
- **Doodle's real strengths are in his spirit.**
- **From the beginning, Doodle defies death and refuses to recognize the coffin that Daddy builds for him as his own.**

Characters: Doodle

- He shows a sense of wonder and respect for nature, crying with wonder at the beauty of Old Woman Swamp.
- He is the first to notice the ibis and honors the bird by giving it a careful burial while finding a way of respecting his mother's orders not to touch it.
- This shows his compassionate heart and emphasizes a symbolic link b/n boy and bird.

Characters: Doodle

- **This symbolic link is confirmed when Doodle dies on the same day as the bird and in a way that mirrors its fate.**
- **Doodle's greatest fear is of being left behind by his impatient Brother.**
- **When this happens, he dies of a heart attack (heart break) while trying to keep up with Brother.**

Characters: Aunt Nicey

- Aunt to Brother and Doodle
- Delivers Doodle and is the only person who believes he will live
- Has a religious nature, giving thanks when Doodle shows everyone that he can walk.
- Because Doodle is born with a caul, traditionally “Jesus’ nightgown”, she warns that he should be treated with special respect since he may turn out to be a saint.

Characters: Aunt Nicey

- Though prompted by superstitious belief, the comment shows an appreciation of Doodle's spiritual qualities and foreshadows a suggested symbolic link between Doodle, the Ibis, and Christ
(DISCLAIMER)

- **Occasionally a baby is born with its head partially covered by fetal membrane. This membrane has been called a caul, and it has attracted a number of superstitions and folk remedies. In the north of England, the caul was called "sillyhow," meaning blessed hood (Radford and Radford 1974: 92). Fishermen carried a caul as an amulet while at sea to protect them from drowning, and also from seasickness and scurvy (Souter 1995: 40). In Scotland it was believed that a person born with a caul had special healing powers (Beith 1995: 94).**

FYI: Caul



Setting (establishing atmosphere)

- The writer uses the swamp as a backdrop for the dev't of the relationship b/n the narrator & Doodle.
- The swamp often suggests feelings of melancholy.
- At one point, the narrator says that the swamp is full of “the sweet-sick smell of bay flowers” that hang everywhere “like a mournful song”.

Setting (establishing atmosphere)

- The story also takes place during WWI, & the knowledge that soldiers & citizens are being killed & wounded in the war provides an appropriate background for the story
- Doodle dies as afternoon is turning to evening and summer is turning to fall. This makes his death seem more natural, a part of the larger scheme

Setting (establishing atmosphere)

- This ties Doodle more to nature
- It also makes it clear that something sweet & full of life has ended.



Point of View

- **At the time of Doodle's death, the narrator is 12-years old.**
- **When he tells the story, the narrator is an adult, & the intervening years have distanced him from Doodle & his death, making the episode seem more poetic & less terrifying than it seems at the time.**

Point of View

- He can be philosophical about his own role in Doodle's life & death.
- If the story were told by the narrator at a younger age, it would probably be less reflective & symbolic, more devoted to the actual horror of the death and the aftermath (the funeral, etc.)

Mood

- The first paragraph creates a serious, gently melancholic mood, and its references to life and death, the “bleeding” tree, and the garden “stained” with petals, foreshadow the later events in the story.
- The reference to the oriole nest, “untenanted and rock[ing] back and forth like an empty cradle,” also foreshadows Doodle’s death.

Mood

- The reference to the graveyard flowers suggests that the story will be about death.
- This entire first paragraph creates a mood of sadness and loss, appropriate to the story as a whole.



Symbols: Doodle's Death

- **Doodle dies from pulmonary or coronary hemorrhage, brought on by strenuous exercise.**
- **His weak heart is mentioned earlier in the story**



Symbols: Bird

- **Doodle's fantasy about the peacock. Peacocks are associated with pride (the narrator)**
- **The peacock is linked to the scarlet ibis. Doodle is himself a rare and wonderful bird.**
- **The scarlet ibis is a beautiful, delicate, unusual, and ephemeral bird when it appears in the story – also out of place. So is Doodle when he appears in the narrator's life.**

Symbols: Coffin

- The narrator shows Doodle the coffin in part to be mean, but also to have Doodle realize that his health has been precarious from the beginning.**
- Doodle touches the coffin because the narrator will not carry him down from the loft if he doesn't.**
- On a deeper level, Doodle's touching the coffin may indicate an attempt to deal with the possibility of his own death.**

Symbols: Coffin & Go-Cart

- **The go-cart is another wooden box build~~d~~ by the father.**
- **Just as the coffin reflected an expectation of Doodle's death, the go-cart mirrored the family's expectation that Doodle would forever be confined.**

Symbols: Coffin & Go-Cart

- **His brother also limits him with the nickname “Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle”**
- **Aunt Nicey does not approve – she sees Doodle’s spiritual potential; it isn’t fitting of a saint.**

SYMBOL: Doodle & the Ibis (the final metaphor)

- **Doodle's neck appears unusually long and slim, like the bird's.**
- **Bird blown away from its native habitat by a hurricane (seen as bad luck by Aunt Nicey); Doodle, too, is left behind in a storm.**
- **STORM: symbolic of conflict / inner turmoil (archetype).**

SYMBOL: Doodle & the Ibis (the final metaphor)

- **Like the bird's, the boy's neck is vermilion, for he has hemorrhaged.**
- **His legs, bent sharply at the knees, seem rather like the bird's legs.**
- **Doodle's breast is red with blood, just as the bird's breast is red.**

Motifs: the bond b/n the boys

- They both have vivid imaginations and enjoy spinning elaborate fantasies. This “lying” creates a strong bond between them (also symbolizes that all they are doing to make Doodle stronger is itself a fantasy).
- They also both have a great appreciation of Old Woman Swamp.
- The two stick by each other; Doodle doesn't tell his parents how the narrator makes him exercise and the narrator takes him everywhere.

Motifs: Doodle's Favorite Lie (characterization)

- **Doodle's story about the peacock and his plans for the future indicate that he is a gentle, bright, poetic, and highly imaginative child.**

Religious Imagery (DISCLAIMER)

- **Doodle is born with a caul,
“Jesus’s nightgown”**
- **The ibis rests on a “bleeding”
tree / wooden cross of the
crucifixion**
- **The ibis dies & falls from the tree/
Christ dies on the cross**

Religious Imagery (DISCLAIMER)

- **Colors of the dead ibis: scarlet feathers & white veil over the eyes = symbolic colors of the Passion of Christ (Easter colors), evoking earthly suffering and spiritual serenity (humanity & divinity)**

Religious Imagery (DISCLAIMER)

- **Doodle kneels before the dead ibis and reverently buries the bird while other members of his family continue their lunch (the disciples cared for Jesus's body after death while the unbelievers carried on with their lives)**

Religious Imagery (DISCLAIMER)

- **Doodle provides an opportunity for Brother to learn and exercise the Christ-like virtues of unconditional love and compassion.**
- **Though Brother fails to learn this while Doodle is alive, his penitent tears over Doodle's dead body & his awareness of the dangers of pride show he has learned his lesson – albeit at the cost of Doodle's life.**

Religious Imagery (DISCLAIMER)

- Doodle, therefore, can be considered to be a literary Christ figure – both had to die so that those left alive could learn the gospel of love and compassion
- In sheltering Doodle's body with his own from the "heresy of rain", Brother finally gives Doodle the selfless love & protection that he was unable to do in Doodle's life.

Quotes & Themes:

“Pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death”

- The narrator’s pride in Doodle is wonderful in that he gets Doodle to accomplish things he would not have otherwise achieved.**
- The narrator’s pride also cements the two together in a wonderful relationship.**

Quotes & Themes:

“Pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death”

- The pride is terrible, however, in that the narrator does not always consider Doodle’s best interests, and he pushes Doodle beyond the limits of his physical capabilities. This leads to Doodle’s death.**

Quotes & Themes:

“It was too late to turn back, for we had both wandered too far into a net of expectations and had left no crumbs behind”

- The narrator & Doodle have both come to realize that Doodle cannot perform some of the physical tasks set for him.**
- They do not dare admit this, for to give up their expectations would be to admit defeat, and their relationship relies too heavily upon these expectations.**