
“The Egg” Post-Reading Questions

1. What are two central ideas in this text?

Two central ideas in this text are:

- Ambition seems to lead one into unhappiness.
- Success can often come at the expense of personal happiness.

2. Examine the author’s word choice and sentence structure throughout the text. What words contain strong connotations? Are there any patterns? What sentences are compelling or powerful? How does the structure of those sentences contribute to their power?

Any time that the author speaks of an attempt at reaching for a dream or for success, the connotation of the words are extremely negative such as “infection”(17), “tragic”(5), “insane”(17). He also mentions that his father goes from being sociable and happy to being “habitually silent and discouraged”(8) upon becoming more ambitious. He also uses the structure of his sentences to create a cynical tone toward his parent’s attempts at success, particularly the chicken farm. In paragraph 5 he uses long, complex sentences to detail the disgusting nature of chicken farming. “It is born out of an egg, lives for a few weeks as a tiny fluffy thing such as you will see pictured on Easter cards, then becomes hideously naked, eats quantities of corn and meal bought by the sweat of your father’s brow, gets diseases called pip, cholera, and other names, stands looking with stupid eyes at the sun, becomes sick and dies”(Paragraph 5). Here he uses a complex-compound sentence to take the reader through the entire lifecycle of a chick. He follows such complex sentences with short sentences like “It is all unbelievably complex. Most philosophers must have been raised on chicken farms”(Paragraph 5). He uses simple sentences here as a sarcastic punchline to the joke of chicken farming.

In paragraph 25, the author also uses varied syntax to create a powerful scene that summarizes the father’s failure. “Father made a last desperate effort to conquer the egg and make it do the thing that would establish his reputation as one who knew how to entertain guests who came into his restaurant. He worried the egg. He attempted to be somewhat rough with it. He swore and the sweat stood out on his forehead. The egg broke under his hand. When the contents spurted over his clothes, Joe Kane, who had stopped at the door, turned and laughed”(Paragraph 25). In this section, the author uses short, simple sentences to show the individual steps that the father goes through to make this “dream” happen. Each step gets progressively more desperate, building on the step (and sentence) before, culminating in a complete humiliation as told in a compound sentence. The author uses progressively longer sentences in this section to create build up to the father’s humiliation and the climax of the story.

3. How does the author create tone in “The Egg”? Is the tone consistent throughout, or does it shift? How does the tone reveal the author’s attitude toward the American Dream and family relationships?

The story begins with an upbeat, almost cheerful tone as the author discusses his father’s life before he married, stating that his father was “quite happy in his position in life”(Paragraph 1). However, as the “American passion for getting up in the world took possession” (Paragraph 2) of his parents, the tone changes to cynical as the narrator sees the futility of his parent’s goals. In discussing the chicken farm, he states that they “wait until your expectations are thoroughly aroused and then walk under the wheels of a wagon”(Paragraph 5). Here he is not only talking with cynicism about chickens, but also about what happens when one has expectations about anything. This cynicism also seems to reflect his feelings of disillusionment toward the American Dream. In regards to his father’s schemes, he also states that “in the

long nights when there was little to do father had time to think. That was his undoing”(Paragraph 15). Again, the narrator uses cynicism to discuss his father’s dreams of a better life. Even as he discusses his father’s attempt at being an entertainer, the narrator remains cynical stating “he was no doubt suffering from an attack of stage fright”(Paragraph 20). He seems to think what his father is doing is comical and ridiculous. This feeling also seems to extend to the idea of dreams themselves.

In the last paragraph of the story, however, his tone moves from cynical to resignation. He states, “I wondered why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg. The question got into my blood. It has stayed there, I imagine, because I am the son of my father”(Paragraph 27). He sees the circle of the egg and the circle of the American Dream as unstoppable--in nature and in his own life. He knows the unhappiness that it brings, but he also knows that people will continue to strive for their dreams at all costs.

4. How do the narrator’s point of view, tone, and characterization contribute to the development of multiple themes?

The author’s point of view as the biased observer gives the reader the chance to see the parent’s behavior from the unfiltered viewpoint of a grown adult making sense of his childhood. The narrator is remembering the events of his childhood, but through the lens of an adult who can interpret and explain the events with more insight. This adult point of view explains the cynical tone. The narrator has enough life experience to recognize the flaws of his parents and, more importantly, the flaws inherent in the American Dream. These flaws in the American Dream are the themes of this story and are highlighted through the point of view and tone. The American Dream is portrayed as a never-ending journey into disappointment. Ambition itself is also portrayed negatively, as the narrator illustrates how all the sacrifices in the world do not necessarily equate to happiness.