Greasy Lake

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF T. C. BOYLE

Raised in Westchester County, New York in the 1960s, T.C. Boyle weathered a rebellious youth (he describes his younger self as "a maniacal, crazy driver [and] a punk pure and simple) and a drug-addled early adulthood before landing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he studied with American masters of the short story John Cheever and Raymond Carver. Inspired by writers of the grotesque and the fantastic such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Flannery O'Connor, Boyle's work melds satire and dark comedy, moral inquiry, and observations on humanity's role in the destruction of nature. The author of sixteen novels and eleven short story collections, Boyle's starry career spans four decades. He has won awards from the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, the O. Henry Prize, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A child of the 1960s, T.C. Boyle is a member of the Baby Boomer generation. "Greasy Lake" explores the tensions that grew out of the prosperity of the period, as well as the failures of the American dream despite the appearance of boundless opportunity and great fortune. The narrator and his friends think it is cool to be "bad"—context clues within the story tell the reader that these boys are financially comfortable and middle-class, but they reject their cushy position in life in favor of seeking thrills and danger in places like Greasy Lake. They're tourists in the land of "badness," just as were many members of the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

T.C. Boyle was inspired during his time at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop by the work of mentors like John Cheever ("the Chekhov of the suburbs"), John Irving, and Raymond Carver. From these teachers, the authors of acclaimed works such as *Bullet Park*, *The World According to Garp*, and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Boyle inherited an interest in writing dark humor, "dirty realism," and stories that investigated the failure of the American dream. Boyle's work is often described as lush and "maximalist," where the work of Carver and Cheever pioneered a "minimalist" writing aesthetic. Boyle's rich language and highly imaginative plots have roots in the work of Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*), Charles Dickens (*Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*), and even noted American satirist Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Greasy Lake
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **When Published:** 1985, as the title story of the collection *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernist
- **Genre:** Literary fiction; short fiction; realism; Americana
- **Setting:** New York State
- **Climax:** After brawling with a "bad character" on a visit to Greasy Lake, the unnamed narrator, hiding at the lake's edge finds a dead body.
- **Antagonist:** "The Bad Character;" industry; stasis
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dangerous Characters. In 1988, "Greasy Lake" was adapted into a short film starring Eric Stoltz as the narrator and James Spader as Digby. Lasting just under thirty minutes, the film remains true to the story's brevity and simplicity.

Sprits in the Night. T.C. Boyle named "Greasy Lake" for Bruce Springsteen's song "Spirit in the Night," written and recorded for Springsteen's debut album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* (1973). This song tells the story of a group of teenagers, "all duded up for [a] Saturday night," who take "a bottle of rose" and drive "a mile down the dark side of route eight-eight" to "Greasy Lake."

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator, looking back on his past, recalls "a time when it was good to be bad," when he and his friends, at nineteen years old, were desperate to be seen as "dangerous characters." In order to do so they "wore torn-up leather jackets, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine, [and] went up to **Greasy Lake**." Once a clear, glistening lake, it has now become a murky and "festering" place, but it is still all the boys know of nature.

It is the third night of summer vacation, and the boys are dreadfully bored—Greasy Lake offers the possibility of danger, intoxication, and sex. The narrator and his friends Digby and Jeff (who, like the narrator, are teenagers benefiting from a comfortable, middle-class adolescence) take the narrator's

mother's **Bel Air** out "past the housing developments and shopping malls" to the lake. When they arrive, a mint-condition '57 Chevy is parked in the dirt lot at the lakefront, and on the other side of the lot there is an abandoned motorcycle. Digby recognizes the Chevy as belonging to their friend Tony Lovett; they decide to play a "hilarious" joke on "Tony," and flash their brights, honk the car's horn, and jump out to go "press [their] witty faces" against the Chevy's window." As they do, the narrator drops his **keys** in the grass.

The narrator and his friends quickly realize that the car does not belong to Tony Lovett, but rather to a "very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots." The Bad Character, infuriated, begins attacking the narrator while Digby attempts to fight back with moves he learned in "a course in martial arts for phys-ed credit." Digby is quickly "laid out" by the Bad Character, so Jeff attacks the man while the narrator retrieves a tire iron from beneath the front seat of his mother's car and uses it to bring the Bad Character down in one fell swoop.

As the three boys stand over the Bad Character's unconscious body, his companion, The Fox, emerges from the car screaming. She's barefoot, "dressed in panties and a man's shirt," and she calls the boys "animals." The narrator notes her "blow-dried hair, silver [anklet, and] flash[ing] toenails." The boys descend upon her, "tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh."

A car pulls into the lot and the boys scatter. Their car keys are lost and so, unable to drive away, they "bolt" for cover elsewhere. The narrator runs to the lake's edge, planning to "swim for it," but he feels something in the water—realizing it is a dead body, the narrator stumbles away horrified.

The narrator hears The Fox tell the two blond drivers of the car that the boys "tried to rape [her]" and then two voices (one of which the narrator recognizes, with relief, to be the Bad Character's) call threats against the boys into the night. The narrator hears the three men "turn to [his mother's] car," and he peeks through the weeds to watch as the Bad Character and the two blond men destroy the Bel Air. The Fox, calling the Bad Character "Bobbie," implores him to stop so that they can leave. They do, and are soon followed by the two blond men.

The narrator lies in "the primordial ooze" at the lake's edge for a long time, bemoaning his bad fortune. He recalls the dead body, and realizes that it belongs to "the owner of the chopper, no doubt, a bad character come to this." Thankful for his life, and for the approaching dawn, the narrator returns to his mother's car, inspecting the damage.

Digby and Jeff join the narrator, noting that "at least" the tires are intact, and they'll be able to drive home. The three boys clean up the car in silence. The narrator reaches into his pocket for his keys, but remembers that they're missing; he spots them in the grass, "no more than five feet" from the car. He retrieves them and starts the car.

A silver Mustang covered in flame decals pulls into the dirt lot and two girls step out of it. They inspect the lone motorcycle in the corner of the lot and begin calling for "Al." One of the girls approaches the boys—she is "stoned or drunk," and asks if they've seen Al, the owner of the bike. The boys tell her they have not. The girl tells the boys that they look like "pretty bad characters" and offers them pills; the boys refuse, and the narrator drives away. He looks back in his rearview mirror and sees the older girl "still standing there, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched."

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator of "Greasy Lake" is nineteen and "cultivates decadence like a taste." Desperate to appear "bad" and "dangerous," he tries to seem passive and cool, but he actually reveals himself to be nervous and indecisive in the face of real danger. Just like his friends Jeff and Digby, the narrator is understood to be firmly middle-class, though he is desperate to shake that uncool identity. He floats through his days and nights acting like he doesn't "give a shit about anything" and hoping that exciting things will happen to him. From an unknown point in the future, the narrator tells the story of a night when he and his friends drove their parents' **cars** up to **Greasy Lake**. After an encounter with a Bad Character goes awry, the narrator hides at the edge of Greasy Lake, where he finds a dead body. Between the physical fight with the Bad Character and the horror of discovering the body, the narrator is shaken and changed. In the light of morning, he and his friends recognize their shameful behavior and the stark reality of their foolish dreams of danger. Boyle has noted, in past interviews, the autobiographical tilt of "Greasy Lake," and with his own history of pursuing "badness," it's possible that Boyle uses the narrator as a conduit for expressing the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of his own teenage years.

Digby – Along with Jeff, Digby is one of the narrator's two best friends. The narrator describes him as a "dangerous character." Digby, who is nineteen, wears an earring and "allow[s] his father to pay his tuition at Cornell." Comfortably middle-class and "bad" in the same false way the narrator is bad, Digby represents the three boys' foolish desire for danger.

Jeff – One of the narrator's two best friends, Jeff's primary characteristic is his inaction. He is lazy, uncertain, and is "thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop proprietor." At nineteen, Jeff has big ideas, but is unwilling to act on them, content to laze about with his friends and waste his time up at **Greasy Lake**. Both Digby and Jeff, the narrator says, are "slick and quick [and] bad," though his criteria for "badness" is little more than someone who "wears mirror shades at breakfast and dinner, in the shower, in closets and caves."

The "Bad Character" (Bobbie) – When the narrator, Digby, and

Jeff arrive at **Greasy Lake**, they spot a metallic blue **'57 Chevy**, and assume it is their friend Tony Lovett's car. As they honk their horn and hoot at "Tony," a "very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots rip[s] out of the driver's door." He immediately starts attacking the three boys. They attempt to subdue him with lame "kung-fu" moves, but it isn't until the narrator attacks the Bad Character with a tire iron that the Bad Character drops to the ground. The boys' defeat of the Bad Character makes plain to them the horrific reality of being "bad," and the fact that their torn leather jackets and fake karate cannot prepare them for the realities of the "greasy" underworld of their hometown. The Bad Character is the human embodiment of danger; he is "a man of action," according to the narrator, and his dangerous clothing and fearsome bearing are sharp in the narrator's mind as he recounts their brawl.

"The Fox" –The Fox emerges from The Bad Character's **Chevy** after the narrator has knocked The Bad Character unconscious with a tire iron. She is in "panties and a man's shirt," and wears a silver anklet. Her painted toenails signal to the narrator, Digby, and Jeff, in their intoxicated, frightened state, that she is "already tainted," and they attack her, "tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh." When a Trans-Am pulls into the lot, the boys abandon her, and she cries to the two blond men driving the approaching car that the three boys tried to rape her. The Fox brings out the boys' true badness and represents their descent into actual danger and violence—when they attack her, they are no longer playacting at being a cool kind of bad, but instead they have descended into true moral decay.

The Blond Men – The Blond Men are a pair of men in "fraternity jackets" who drive up to the lake in a **Trans Am** just as the narrator, Digby, and Jeff are about to attack The Fox. Though the boys are hidden by the time the Blond Men arrive, they can hear one of the men as he screams into the night, threatening (in a Midwestern accent) to "kill" the attackers. The Blond Men help the Bad Character (once he regains consciousness) to destroy the narrator's mother's Bel Air, and then all three return to their respective cars and drive away.

Older Girl – The morning after the boys' fateful night at **Greasy Lake**, as they clean up the narrator's mother's **car** and prepare to leave, two girls pull up in a Mustang. They both wear "tight jeans, stiletto heels, [and have] hair like frozen fur." The older one looks about 25 and seems to be strung out on something, though whether it's drugs or alcohol, the narrator is unsure. She tells the boys she is looking for "Al," whom the narrator believes to be the dead body he stumbled upon down at the lake's edge, and she tells the boys that they "look like some pretty bad characters" and offers them a handful of pills, which they refuse. The older girl is exactly the kind of girl that the narrator had hoped to meet on his way up to Greasy Lake the previous night; in the light of day, though, it's clear that her "badness" is unglamorous, pathetic, and destructive.

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.

DANGER

The narrator of "Greasy Lake" describes a world in which "courtesy and winning ways [are] out of style," and in which he and his friends "cultivate decadence like a taste." To put it bluntly, the narrator and his friends think it's cool to be bad. This story explores the allure of danger through the narrator's retelling of a truly dangerous night that he and his friends passed at **Greasy Lake**, ultimately concluding that the cool sheen of danger they sought is far different from the reality of danger, which can be depraved and terrifying.

In the story's opening passages, the narrator describes the way he and his friends moved through their world at the time: "We were all dangerous characters then," he says. "We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine." This description captures how the narrator and his friends are, in many ways, just playacting at being dangerous. They don't have a clue of what they're doing: they're not even sure if whatever they're sniffing is cocaine, but they sniff it anyway to cement their "badness" and reaffirm their so-called commitment to living dangerously. The absurdity of their charade only increases when the narrator and his friends think they are playing a prank on one of their acquaintances, only to find themselves face-to-face with a truly Bad Character, fighting a serious fight by doing ineffectual kung-fu moves against someone who actually intends to harm them. The fight leads to the narrator running away from the danger only to encounter an actual dead body. These experiences of real, physical danger and the sight of the body (a representation of the consequences of living dangerously) shatter the narrator's idea that danger is cool and alluring. Danger, it turns out, is not thrilling, but terrifying and awful, leading to death and despair.

Witnessing the bad characters behaving dangerously at Greasy Lake is terrifying enough for the narrator, but when he and his friends dip into depraved, dangerous behavior themselves, they really come to recognize that they are in moral and physical peril. Though it's never stated explicitly, the narrator and his friends seem to understand that their "badness" is just a phase—Digby's father pays for his education at Cornell, and the narrator drives his mother's **station wagon**, both of which point to their ability to return to their middle class lives. But when they end up in a fight with the Bad Character and bring

him down together, the fear that they have actually committed murder forces them to realize how quickly their posturing can slip into true badness. When The Fox, the Bad Character's companion, emerges from the car, the boys attack her and are only stopped from raping her when another car arrives. There is every reason to believe that they would have followed through with the atrocious act had no one else come to the lake. Because of this, when the narrator, fleeing all of this danger and badness, encounters the dead body, he faces a double horror: the horror that his "badness" could have gotten him killed, as well as the deeper horror that he, too, has the capacity to behave unforgivably.

The morning after these events, the narrator and his friends find their missing **car keys** and attempt to drive away, but a silver Mustang pulls up to Greasy Lake and two "stoned or drunk" women approach the boys, ready to "party." This—the prospect of girls and drugs—was exactly the sort of thing that the boys had been looking for and even dreaming of on their way up to the lake. Now, though, the narrator and his friends are so shaken by their experience that they are "rigid as catatonics." They turn the women down and drive away, and as the narrator looks back, he sees one woman "watching [them], her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched." She is just another casualty of the "badness" the boys so desperately wanted to embody. She is pathetic and destroyed, her allure stripped away entirely.

NATURE VS. DEVELOPMENT

At the start of the story, the narrator explains that **Greasy Lake** has gone from being a remarkable natural landmark (noted for the "clarity" of its waters) to a complete cesspool. "Glittering broken glass" and "beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires" line the lake's edge. As Greasy Lake has grown more and more physically polluted, the behavior of those who live around it and visit it has grown polluted, too. Where once people might have gone to the lake to experience the beauty of nature, now the narrator and those like him go because of the prospect of "a girl tak[ing] off her clothes and plung[ing] into the festering murk," or the possibility of getting drunk, high, and "howl[ing] at the stars." The narrator states that "this [was] nature." His comment—that doing drugs and partying at a polluted, "festering" lake is "nature"—highlights just the opposite: that the narrator is so estranged from nature that he can't even recognize it.

Through the way that the narrator and his friends and acquaintances treat and regard the lake, as well as through the physical descriptions of its decline, T.C. Boyle makes Greasy Lake into a visual and emotional metaphor for the struggle between nature and industry. Even though the narrator doesn't provide a detailed physical description of the town, the limited description he does provide gives the sense that overdevelopment and industrial runoff have sunk into the town's physical and psychic landscape. For instance, the narrator describes the town as being little more than "housing developments and shopping malls" that line the main "strip." The story also subtly connects this polluted and despoiled version of nature to the "pollution" of the people who live within it. The narrator describes himself and his friends as being surrounded by places to spend money and have fun but being unable to enjoy them—the characters are enclosed within a town that features strip malls, plentiful housing, and many bright attractions, yet they still feel an inescapable sense of boredom, emptiness, and aimlessness. In other words, the town's developments provide amusement but not fulfilment, and it is implied that the resulting emptiness and the need to fill it are what drive the characters in "Greasy Lake" toward "badness."

The price of industry is the destruction of nature, and the dark undercurrent of that tradeoff lurks just beneath the surface of "Greasy Lake." The lake's physical condition—frequented by various "greasy characters," such as women strung out on drugs, or the dead body rotting at its edge—mirrors and symbolizes the moral and social condition of the town in which the story is set. Further, in connecting the degradation of the lake to the degradation of the town around it as clearly as he does, Boyle suggests the ill effects that unfettered development and industry can have on a place. Though such development is seen as important in America, Boyle seems to be arguing that development does not necessarily equal improvement.

ACTION VS. INACTION

Emotional weariness, stagnancy, and dissatisfaction plague the characters of "Greasy Lake." The narrator and his friends present themselves as "bad characters" who prize indifference. They "strike elaborate poses to show that [they don't] give a shit about anything," and they are each completely passive individuals in their own ways. Digby "allow[s] his father to pay his tuition at Cornell;" Jeff is aimless, only "thinking" about opening up a shop; and the narrator describes himself and his friends as being lethally bored and desperate for "action." On the night the story takes place, the three of them have been out **driving** around for some time already, having "cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in and out of every bar [they] could think of, stopped twice for bucket chicken" before they declare that "there [is] nothing to do but [go] up to Greasy Lake." It is the inescapable "inaction" of their lives, then, that pushes them to Greasy Lake and to the violence that occurs there.

While the narrator feigns indifference, he also fetishizes action. Of brawling with the Bad Character, the narrator recalls that "there was no reasoning with this bad greasy character—clearly he was a man of action." The narrator, even as he's being

pummeled, seems to admire the Bad Character's ability to act, and he refers to the blows the Bad Character strikes against him in almost loving terms, as "lusty Rockette kick[s]" and "whistling roundhouse blow[s.]" There is an implication here that the Bad Character is who the narrator and his friends want to be. Not only is the Bad Character bad, but he is committed to action—whereas the narrator and his friends can't even make up their minds about what to do on a Saturday night.

At the same time, the narrator's description of the Bad Character as a "man of action" is clearly meant to be ironic (or at least it's ironic from the point of view of the adult narrator, not the teen version of him present during the events of the story). The sheer ridiculous brutality of what the Bad Character does in retaliation for a mistaken teenage prank clearly indicates that there is no honor or glory in simply being a man of action—the content of that action matters. Further, the Bad Character—despite his willingness to "act"—is clearly headed toward a dead end in life, symbolized by the body. The story, then, portrays inaction, wrongheaded action, and "badness" as being inextricably linked. Notably, no characters in the story provide examples of "good" actions, which seems echoed in Boyle's descriptions of the town. Greasy Lake has been allowed to fall into deep and despoiled disrepair, and that disrepair represents the entire town's stagnancy. In such a place, where the "bad" actions of pollution and environmental destruction have been meant with indifference, good action seems not only pointless but beyond comprehension entirely.

MEMORY, REMINISCENCE, AND THE PULL OF THE PAST

"Greasy Lake" is set in the past: it's a story from the narrator's memory, and there is a distance between the older narrator who tells the story and the younger version of himself who is at the story's center. This distance is evident from the way that the narrator's over-the-top tone seems to mock his younger self and his friends, as well as through the narrator's perspective on the night's events. For instance, he doesn't just say that he dropped his **car keys**; he describes dropping the keys as his "first mistake," suggesting consequences to come. The narrator has clearly spent a lot of time thinking through that moment, or else he wouldn't have been able to diagnose dropping the keys as his "first mistake." At the same time, the urgent clarity of detail throughout the story emphasizes that even though this moment is far in the narrator's past, he still lives with it. The visuals and visceral feelings of the night at Greasy Lake leap off the page—the narrator's fear as he drops his jingling car keys into the dark grass; The Fox's "tainted" red toenails, which provoke the narrator and his friends to attack her; the narrator's horrific discovery of the dead body. As all of this hyper-vivid detail builds and builds, the story suggests that the memory of this night has come to consume the narrator, even in his adulthood—the detail is so vivid because the narrator has relived it, powerless to change it, over and over.

In the story's concluding paragraph, the narrator hovers even more sensuously over every detail surrounding his final moments at Greasy Lake, describing the lingering specter of the strung-out girl reaching for the narrator and his friends as they drive away. This is the very kind of girl the narrator and his friends had hoped to meet at Greasy Lake, but she is now made horrific in the light of day, just as the entire incident is made horrible for the narrator in the bright clarity of his adult memory. The narrator recalls "inch[ing **the car**] forward with a groan, shaking off pellets of glass like an old dog shedding water after a bath," and he remembers "a sheen of sun on the lake." The specifics of the narrator's memory of this experience are intense and vivid, which makes clear that this night, more than possibly any other night of the narrator's life, has made him into whoever he might be in the present day.

SYMBOLS

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

GREASY LAKE

T.C. Boyle named Greasy Lake after a line in the 1973 Bruce Springsteen hit "Spirit in the Night," in which Springsteen describes driving with a group of his friends toward Greasy Lake, which is a spot for fun, raucousness, drinking, and "making love in the dirt." The Greasy Lake of Boyle's story, by contrast, is a "stripped, strafed" and polluted basin, which is a symbol for the danger and decadence that Boyle's characters so deeply revere. Once clear and beautiful, the lake is now a "festering" repository for trash, which underscores its degraded and corrupting qualities. Like the River Styx in Greek myth (the storied boundary between Earth and the Underworld) Greasy Lake seems to change all who step into its waters, anointing them into danger and depravity. When the narrator wades waist deep into the lake, prepared to submerge himself literally and metaphorically into the dirt and danger it represents, he is, in a way, saved by the **dead body** he finds floating just off the shore. The narrator had intended to fully submerge himself and swim to the "stripped" island in the middle of the lake, a journey which represents utter descent into "badness" and danger. However, after finding the body, the narrator gets out of the muddy water, leaving the swim unfinished, and instead he reckons with his foolish and immoral behavior.

CARS

The narrator, Jeff, and Digby are obsessed with

cars and the freedom and danger they represent, but the narrator is stuck driving his mother's (presumably clunky) Chevrolet Bel Air station wagon while the people the boys encounter at **Greasy Lake** drive much cooler cars. T.C. Boyle describes each car that appears in the story with meticulous specificity and glittering prose, asking the readers to pay attention to the vehicle's characteristics, since the cars speak volumes about the characters associated with them. The narrator, as mentioned, drives his mother's lame station wagon; the Bad Character drives an older, cooler '57 Chevy that is "metallic blue" and in "mint" condition; the Blond Men, true bad characters themselves, drive a Trans Am, which is a sleeker, "badder" car; the two women who approach the boys at the end of the story drive a flashy silver Mustang "with flame decals." The narrator's mother's car, then, reflects his youth and naiveté, and suggests that even though he affects the demeanor of someone who is bad and cool, his integrity is still intact. The other people at Greasy Lake, however, drive cars that show their corruption and moral decay. When the Bad Character and the two men in the Trans Am destroy the narrator's mother's Bel Air in retribution for the boys' attack on The Fox, the act can be seen as a metaphor for the destruction of the boys' naiveté. They thought that driving fast and looking "bad" were symbols of freedom; the reality, though, is that their cushy lifestyles and innocence were the true freedoms, and the reality of danger and decadence is not one they can handle.

THE NARRATOR'S KEYS

The narrator's "first mistake" at **Greasy Lake** was dropping his keys into the "dark, rank, mysterious nighttime grass." The keys can be seen as a symbol of safety, home, and innocence (they are, after all, his mother's keys), and losing them represents the narrator's loss of innocence in the face of true danger. As the Bad Character descends angrily upon the narrator, he searches furiously for the keys, describing them as his "grail and salvation." Indeed, without the keys, the boys cannot escape the horror of Greasy Lake, which shows how difficult it is to return to a life of safety and innocence once a person has tasted something else. Without the keys, the narrator and his friends are lost in the underworld of Greasy Lake with no way out, but as dawn comes (along with the boys' realizations that they do not want to be truly dangerous characters), the disheveled narrator spots the keys "glinting like jewels… no more than five feet" from the driver's side door. The narrator gets into the car and starts the engine, thinking that there is "no need to get philosophical about [the keys]"—in other words, he recognizes their symbolic weight, but he is so shaken by the events of the evening and the gritty, tough, inescapable reality they've revealed to him that he doesn't see the point in assigning any meaning to their discovery beyond the visceral relief of escape.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* published in 1986.

Greasy Lake Quotes

❝ There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were all dangerous characters then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. We were nineteen. We were bad. We struck elaborate poses to show that we didn't give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jeff, Digby

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The atmosphere of "Greasy Lake" is rooted from the very first paragraph in memory and reminiscence. However, not all of the narrator's reminiscences are fond or pleasant. The narrator begins the story with a description of himself and his friends at the age of nineteen, establishing the story's main themes: the allure of danger, the pitfalls of inaction, and the double-edged sword of nostalgia and regret that often comes with memories of youth and naiveté. Boyle establishes Greasy Lake as a place for "bad characters" and the rebellious youth of the unnamed town, and gives his audience a clear atmospheric picture of the characters whose growth and action—or lack thereof—the story will chart. The over-the-top language establishes a clear distance from the narrator of the past and the narrator of the present who is reflecting on his teenage years, and creates the narrator's tone of humor, sarcasm, and equal amounts of empathy and derision for his younger, past self.

> Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls: that was the way out to Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters. Now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars…This was nature.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1-2

Explanation and Analysis

The destruction of nature and the ways in which that destruction affects the psychic and physical landscape of what's left behind is at the heart of much of "Greasy Lake." Though Boyle's physical descriptions of the town itself are spare, it's apparent that the land around Greasy Lake has been built upon and developed beyond recognition of what it once was. As this transformation has taken place, Greasy Lake itself has been transformed from a beautiful refuge and a natural haven into a wasteland where danger and decadence have taken root and flourished. The fact that the narrator believes that "nature" is simply a place for getting into trouble reflects the effect of nature's absence on the town and its inhabitants.

> It was early June, the third night of summer vacation. The first two nights we'd been out [driving around] till dawn, looking for something we never found.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jeff, Digby

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, Digby, and Jeff, are desperate for some semblance of action in the middle of their sleepy, overdeveloped hometown. They see Greasy Lake as, if nothing else, a chance for something—anything—to happen to them. The boys are unable to find what they're looking for, in large part because they seem unsure *what* they are looking for—suggesting that their true desire is for any kind of excitement or divergence from the routine. Awash in the boredom and monotony of suburban American overdevelopment, they see an opportunity to find excitement in the dangerous scene at Greasy Lake, only to realize that danger may not be the right remedy for their boredom, and furthermore that excitement as an end in itself may not be what they wanted in the first place.

> There was no reasoning with this bad greasy character—clearly he was a man of action.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The "Bad Character" (Bobbie), Jeff, Digby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The Bad Character, after being "pranked" by the narrator, Jeff, and Digby, leaps from his car and begins to attack them. Delighted and excited by an encounter, at long last, with true "badness," the boys make no attempt to "reason" with the "greasy" man. Defined until now by their own inaction, the boys are thrilled to see someone who appears to be "a man of action"—never mind the fact that the Bad Character is just another sleazy character wasting time up at Greasy Lake, and his "action" is emblematic of the violence and decadence that plagues the boys' hometown. The narrator creates a somewhat troubling opposition between "reason" and "action," pointing to the fact that, for the young protagonist of the story, the notion of mature and well-reasoned action may still be a foreign concept.

> A single second, big as a zeppelin, floated by. We were standing over him in a circle, gritting our teeth, jerking our necks. No one said anything. Already [I was] envisioning the headlines, the pitted faces of the police inquisitors, the gleam of handcuffs, clank of bars, the big black shadows rising from the back of the cell.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The "Bad Character" (Bobbie), Jeff, Digby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, after suffering several blows from the Bad Character and watching Digby and Jeff endure the same, retrieves a tire iron from beneath the front seat of his mother's car and uses it to knock the Bad Character unconscious with just one hit. The narrator, who kept a tire iron beneath the seat because he believed it to be the type of thing a true bad character would do, is suddenly seized with fear, anxiety, and remorse as he realizes he cannot handle the reality of being "bad." He has taken an action—arguably the first decisive action we've seen him take in the course of the entire story—and instantly regrets it, longing to return to the haven of his previous state of inaction and lack of "badness." The narrator's memories of the terror of this moment are sharp and clear, and have stayed with him well beyond his youth, and continue to pull him back into the ice-cold fear he experienced so many years ago.

> We were bad characters, and we were scared and hot and three steps over the line—anything could have happened.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), "The Fox", Jeff, Digby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, Digby, and Jeff have all yearned for so long to truly be seen and recognized—by each other, by society—as "bad characters." They have done all they can to transform themselves into the physical ideal of being "bad," by wearing leather jackets, slouching around with toothpicks in their mouths, and wearing sunglasses indoors and at night. However, their badness has remained superficial and image-based rather than moral and action-based—that is, until they attack The Fox in a primal, lust-fueled frenzy. After having attacked and knocked out the Bad Character, it is almost as if the floodgates of the boys' desire to be bad open completely. They leap on The Fox, after collectively judging her as "tainted," and come very close to committing an act of true atrocity. The narrator's recollection that "anything could have happened" demonstrates that he has reflected on the incident as an adult and arrived at the realization that he and his friends, desperate as they were to be seen as "bad," would have ruined the life of an innocent woman in pursuit of their own vain self-image.

> In one of those nasty little epiphanies for which we are prepared by films and TV and childhood visits to the funeral home, I understood what it was that bobbed there so inadmissibly in the dark [water.] Understood, and stumbled back in horror and revulsion, my mind yanked in six different directions (I was nineteen, a mere child, an infant, and here in the space of five minutes I'd struck down one greasy character and blundered into the waterlogged carcass of a second), thinking, The keys, the keys, why did I have to go and lose the keys?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In the story's most climactic moment, the narrator, hiding at the edge of the lake after having assaulted The Fox, brushes up against a dead body while preparing to "swim for it" across the length of Greasy Lake. Just as he is about to submerge himself metaphorically in the danger and decay that the lake represents, the discovery of the dead body forces him to recognize that his desire to embody "badness" as a way to seem cool is a deeply dangerous, foolish, and naïve one. Put differently, he seems to recognize that the true consequences of badness and moral decay are terrifying and extreme beyond what he could have imagined. The narrator is left reeling after his brush with death, and his mind drifts to the loss of his mother's car keys—a symbol of his innocence and his ties to home—demonstrating the end of his naiveté and the dawning of a new understanding about the true costs of destructive behavior.

> "Hey, you guys look like some pretty bad characters—been fightin', huh?"

Related Characters: Older Girl (speaker), Jeff, Digby, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The Older Girl, who arrives at Greasy Lake the morning after the encounter with the Bad Character, just as the boys are preparing to drive away and leave their awful experience behind, is possibly taunting the boys here, or at the very least being playful. However, the boys probably do in fact look at least a little "bad." Their clothes are torn, their faces are streaked with mud and possibly blood, and in their shaken state they no doubt appear like "very bad greasy characters," just as they'd always wanted to. However, the boys have by now come face to face with the terrifying effects of the destructive behavior they had glamorized, as well as their ability to descend into complete moral decay. As a result, they are too shell-shocked to flirt with the woman or to even revel in receiving the one compliment they had worked so hard to earn.

> I looked back. The girl was still standing there, watching us, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As the story draws to a close, the narrator, Jeff, and Digby have refused the Older Girl's offer to "party" and take drugs. They are shell-shocked and "rigid as catatonics" in the wake of the night's events, and have been stripped completely of their illusions regarding "badness" and its allure. In the light of day, the boys' encounter with the Older Girl and her friend—exactly the kind of girls they'd hoped to run into on their way up to Greasy Lake the night before—is rendered in stark and unappealing detail. The contrast between what the friends had fantasized and the grizzly reality that awaited them at the lake highlights the sobering effect of their encounter with the Bad Character. As the friends drive away from the two women, the narrator gets one last glimpse of her shattered posture—a dual symbol of the zombifying effects of "badness" and the overwhelming inertia that plagues their hometown and the people who live there.

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.

GREASY LAKE

From an unknown point in the future, an unnamed narrator looks back on his "dangerous" youth. He describes a time "when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, [and] it was good to be bad." He and his friends, he says, "cultivated decadence like a taste." In order to appear "bad," they wore torn and tough clothes, raced their parents' **station wagons**, and "struck elaborate poses to show that [they] didn't give a shit about anything." The baddest thing of all the bad things they did, the narrator says, was going up to **Greasy Lake.**

The narrator's reminiscences about his youth are tied to the themes of danger, inaction, and the pull of the past. Throughout the story, the narrator will relay—not without shame and embarrassment—the ways in which he and his friends tried to be "bad," unaware of the dangers associated with plunging oneself into a false image—especially such a risky one. As the story will show, the reality of being "dangerous" turns out to be far less glamorous than the narrator could have imagined.

The narrator recalls that **Greasy Lake** was located "through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls." Greasy Lake was once clear and beautiful, but by the time of the narrator's youth, it was "fetid and murky," littered with trash and refuse, and the island at the center of it was "stripped [and] strafed" of vegetation. The allure of Greasy Lake, the narrator recalls, was the fact that "everyone went there." At the lake, there was always a "rich scent of possibility on the breeze," the possibility being the opportunity to "watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk" or to get drunk, high, and "howl at the stars against the primeval [noises] of frogs and crickets. This," the narrator says, "was nature."

The narrator's concept of what constitutes "nature" is deeply skewed. In his hometown, the true hallmarks and value of nature have both been obscured by overdevelopment, resulting in the narrator and his friends' sense of boredom, restlessness, and searching for something they're unable to find. It's clear that from whatever point the narrator is at in his future, he can see clearly that Greasy Lake was not and is not representative of "nature," and he uses over-the-top language to demonstrate the irony of having ever thought it was.

The narrator reflects, in particular, on one night at the lake. He was there, he says satirically, "in the company of two dangerous characters," with his friends Digby—who wears a "gold star" earring and "allow[s] his father to pay his tuition at Cornell"—and Jeff, who is "thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop owner." Both of the narrator's friends are comfortably middle class, as he himself is, and, to demonstrate their desire to be seen as bad, they wear "mirror shades at breakfast and dinner [and] in the shower."

The narrator, looking back on his youth, knows that he and his friends were in no way "dangerous," though they were making every effort to appear that way. The narrator and his friends, all coming from privileged backgrounds, felt the aesthetic allure of appearing "bad," but were blissfully unaware of the actual dangers lurking below the surface of their hometown.

The narrator, in his mother's **Bel Air**, drives Digby and Jeff out to **Greasy Lake**. It is the third night of summer vacation, and the boys are restless, having been out "looking for something [they] never found" two nights in a row. After having "cruised the strip sixty-seven times" and stopped in "every bar and club in a twenty-mile radius," the boys have decided that there is "nothing to do" besides getting drunk on gin up at Greasy Lake.

The boys' boredom is, Boyle implies, tied directly to the overdevelopment of their town and the eradication of nature. The twisted American dream of excess is the culprit, and in the face of that dream the boys turn, foolishly, to places like Greasy Lake in hopes of finding danger—anything to make them feel something.

As the boys pull into the dirt lot at the edge of the lake, they notice a metallic blue **'57 Chevy** in mint condition parked there. "On the far side of the lot," the narrator observes, there is an abandoned "chopper." The narrator is disappointed to find only "some junkie biker and a car freak pumping his girlfriend," and he and his friends realize that they are not "about to find whatever it was [they were] looking for at **Greasy Lake**."

The narrator knows immediately that Greasy Lake will not fulfill his and his friends' needs for connection or engagement with the world around them, but chooses to stay anyway—perhaps unable to resist the allure of danger. The narrator, reflecting on this moment, is helpless to warn his younger self of what's to come as a consequence of their decision to stay.

Digby exclaims that the **Chevy** is "Tony Lovett's car," and honks the Bel Air's horn. The narrator, at Digby's suggestion, turns on the brights. The boys revel in the hilarity of their prank, excited to catch Tony with his pants down and give him a fright. The boys all jump out of the car, hoping to scare Tony and maybe "catch a glimpse of some little fox's tit, [and then] go on to new heights of adventure and daring."

The boys, in a rare moment of decisive action, are inspired to pull a "dangerous" prank—this is their idea of "badness." The boys have no idea what is in store for them—the completion of their prank is, in their minds, a "new height," a fact which speaks to their sheltered naiveté and inability to confront any real danger.

The narrator interrupts the story's flow to highlight two of his major mistakes. The first, he says, "was losing [his] grip on the **keys**" and dropping them in the "dark, mysterious nighttime grass." The second "was identifying the **Chevy** [in the first place] as Tony Lovett's."

The narrator, as he relays the story of the night at Greasy Lake, is awash in the stupidity—and inevitability—of his own past mistakes. He can see them clearly now, as well as the danger they led to, but is powerless to change them.

A "very bad greasy character" emerges from the **Chevy**—which is a "much lighter" blue, the boys realize, "than the robin's-egg of Tony's car." The Bad Character was "clearly a man of action," the narrator recalls with more than a hint of sarcasm, detailing how the man immediately began doling out "lusty Rockette kick[s]" as the narrator crouched in the grass, looking for his missing **keys**.

This is the boys' first encounter with anything remotely dangerous. They are star-struck, absorbed, and enraptured as the "bad character" brutally attacks them. The narrator scrounges for his keys, which symbolize his innocence and ties to home, but is in the midst of a life-altering experience over which he has lost all control, and cannot find them.

While the Bad Character kicks the narrator savagely, Digby steps in to deliver "a savage kung-fu blow," employing a move he learned in a "course in martial arts for phys-ed credit." The Bad Character, "unimpressed," flattens Digby with one blow. Jeff then leaps onto the Bad Character's back, savagely biting his ear. The narrator reaches into **the Bel Air** for the tire iron he keeps under the driver's seat "for just such an occasion as this," despite never having been involved in a real fight and having only ever used the tire iron to actually change tires.

The boys' attempts to fight off the Bad Character further reveal their naiveté and ineptitude. They are in over their heads, though they are still attempting to prove their "badness" and ability to handle a dangerous situation. However, the narrator's remark that Digby had learned his kung-fu moves in gym class is a satirical acknowledgement of exactly how unprepared the friends were for the trouble they had found themselves in.

Though "terrified," the narrator brings the tire iron down on the Bad Character's head. "The effect [is] instantaneous," and the Bad Character, like a "balloon [up against] a man with a straight pin, collapse[s.]" The narrator, Digby, and Jeff stand silently over the Bad Character's unconscious body. The narrator can "already envision the headlines, the gleam of handcuffs, [his] cell."

The narrator has committed himself both to danger and to action by attacking the Bad Character, and the silence that falls over the group as he loses consciousness instantaneously reveals their inability to cope with the reality of the quickly-deteriorating situation . The narrator is full of childlike fear as he envisions the consequences of what he's done. His thoughts spin nervously out of control in a very un-"bad" way.

A scream rips through the silence of the dark night—it is The Fox, emerging from the **Chevy** "barefoot [and] dressed in panties and a man's shirt." She runs, with clenched fists, toward the boys, calling them "animals" for attacking her partner, the Bad Character. The narrator takes in her silver anklet, her painted toenails, and her blow-dried hair. "It was the toenails that did it," the narrator says, before describing how he, Digby, and Jeff leapt upon her, "deranged, panting, tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh. We were bad characters [at last.]"

On the way to the lake the boys had hoped to catch a glimpse of a naked girl, just as they'd hoped to encounter some danger. After actually confronting danger and finding themselves unprepared, they are equally unprepared to actually encounter a half-naked woman—they attack and nearly rape her, so wrapped up are they in their fantasies of "badness" and their sudden escape from inaction. It seems the three friends have bitten off more than they can chew in seeking out danger as a cure for their boredom.

A **car** "[swings] into the lot," catching the boys in their state of "lust and greed and primal badness." The boys run to the Bel Air, but they quickly realize that, due to the missing **keys**, they have no way of starting it. Digby and Jeff bolt, and the narrator runs across the dirt lot to the **lake's** edge. He can hear The Fox's screams in the night. He pushes on into the water, planning to "swim for it" to the woods on the other side of the lake. Once he is waist-deep, he feels something "obscene, soft, [and] wet" in his path; he reaches out to touch it, and "it [gives] like flesh." Realizing that he has encountered a water-bloated dead body, the narrator "stumble[s] back in horror," overwhelmed by the increasingly dangerous events of the night, and lamenting his loss of the keys. The narrator loses his balance and falls onto the corpse, then leaps from the water, but not before catching a horrific glimpse of the corpse's face.

The boys are still cowards at heart—the opposite of dangerous characters, still mired in indecisiveness and inaction. At the height of his fear, the narrator seeks refuge in Greasy Lake. As he is about to plunge himself into its waters in a kind of reverse baptism—cloaking himself in danger and murk—he encounters a dead body, and realizes that he is, both literally and metaphorically, "in too deep" with his fantasy of "badness." The narrator sees the corpse's face and, in it, he sees a possible fate that awaits him at the end of his own descent into danger. He realizes at last just how serious the consequences of his playacting could become. His desire to flee back to safety is symbolized by his yearning to find the car keys.

The narrator, realizing he has made some noise with all his thrashing, hears The Fox telling someone: "It's them: they tried to rape me!" A voice with a Midwestern accent screams out a threat; "then another voice, harsh[ly]" screams out, "Motherfucker!" The narrator realizes, with great relief, that it is the voice of the Bad Character; he is not dead after all. The Bad Character continues to shout curses into the night.

The narrator cowers in fear from the consequences of his stupid and dangerous actions, relieved that he has not killed the Bad Character like he'd feared. He's not grateful so much that the Bad Character is alive, though, as he is that he himself will not have to face any real consequences.

The narrator stays hidden in the underbrush, and listens tensely as the sound of "door[s] slam[ming] and headlights shattering" fill the silence. He peeks through the underbrush and realizes that the Bad Character is, with the narrator's own tire iron and with the help of two blond men, destroying the narrator's mother's **Bel Air**. The Fox begs the Bad Character to stop, pleading with him and calling him "Bobbie." Eventually he listens to her, gets into the Chevy with her, and drives off. The two blond men, left behind and seeming spooked by their own destructive actions, get back into their Trans Am and depart as well.

The narrator is stuck hiding, having crawled back into the realm of inaction after having attempted to be a "man of action" and finding that he was unable to handle it. He listens as the Bad Character, The Fox, and the two Blond Men wreck the Bel Air—retribution for his foolhardy flirtation with danger. The immediate danger of the evening seems to be dissipating when they drive off, but the narrator's sense of freedom and fearlessness—represented by the Bel Air—has been destroyed.

The narrator lies in the grass and "primordial ooze" for an indeterminate length of time. He "contemplate[s] suicide" and tries to think of "an excuse to give [his] parents." After lamenting his own dire circumstances, the narrator's thoughts turn to the dead body. He realizes that the dead body is "worse off" by far, and that he must have been "the owner of the chopper, a bad older character, another headline." The narrator realizes that even though his mother's **car** is destroyed, he still has his life.

As the narrator catastrophizes, he remembers the relative cushiness of his own life, highlighted in the face of encounters with real danger, death, and destruction. For all his melodramatic musing, the narrator is grateful to be alive, and experiences a profound realization concerning the foolishness and very real danger of his attempts at appearing "bad."

As dawn begins to break, the narrator stands and returns to his mother's **car**. He takes stock of the extensive damage, and Digby and Jeff "emerge from [their hiding place in] the trees." Both boys are beaten badly, and their clothes are torn. Jeff begins to clean broken glass out of the front seat of the car, and Digby remarks that "at least they didn't slash the tires." All three boys work to clean out the car's interior. The narrator does not mention the dead body in the **lake**, or his belief that it is the body of the man who owns the motorcycle parked nearby, while they clean in silence. He reaches into his pocket for the **car keys** once some of the damage has been cleaned up, and remembers with a "nasty stab of recollection" that they went missing. He spots them, though, "no more than five feet" away, "glinting like jewels." The narrator sits in the driver's seat and starts the car up.

The boys, each embarrassed and struck dumb by the night's dangerous and demoralizing events, take part in a collective action—cleaning out the damaged husk of the car which once represented their freedom and independence. Having realized that they are not as mature, self-sufficient, or "dangerous" as they'd believed themselves to be, the boys must now figure out who they are to each other and what their relationship will be based on now that their collective self-image of "badness" has been revealed to be hollow. The narrator, having found his keys, can be the one who returns all of them to home and to safety.

A "silver **Mustang** with flame decals" pulls into the lot. Digby and Jeff get into their car and close the doors. The Mustang parks next to the motorcycle, and Digby urges the narrator to drive away, but he remains frozen.

The narrator is so shaken by his brief and disastrous attempt at being a "man of action" that he now seems paralyzed, unable even to flee when faced with the prospect of another confrontation.

Two girls step out of the **car**, dressed in "tight jeans [and] stiletto[s.]" They inspect the motorcycle and call for someone named "Al." Digby again presses the narrator to drive away. Just then, one of the girls—the narrator thinks she looks "older"—walks unsteadily toward the boys; the narrator observes that there is "something wrong with her: she [is] either stoned or drunk."

The boys, in the harsh light of day, are now forced to reckon not only with the folly of their actions, but with the folly of their thoughts and fantasies—the girls they'd hoped to encounter, seen up close, are "wrong" and represent the shattering of the boys' illusions and desires.

The Older Girl asks the boys if any of them have seen "Al," and they tell her that they haven't—the narrator cannot bring himself to speak up about what he believes "Al"'s fate to be. The Older Girl tells the boys that they "look like some pretty bad characters," and she then offers them a handful of unmarked tablets, asking if they want to "party." The narrator, feeling as if he is about to cry, doesn't answer her. Digby, on all three of the boys' behalves, refuses the drugs. The narrator then puts the **car** in gear and begins to drive away. As he does, he looks back in the rearview mirror and sees the Older Girl "still standing there, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched."

The narrator knows that the dead body is probably "Al," but is unable to relay this to the Older Girl; he is unable, too, to accept her invitation to "party." He is once again stuck in a rut of inaction, though now his inaction is the product of vastly different circumstances than at the story's beginning. As the narrator drives away from Greasy Lake, the specter of the girl—and the ruination of all that the narrator and his friends had set out to find—lingers behind him, just as the night's events will linger in the narrator's memories.

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