Marigolds

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUGENIA COLLIER

Eugenia Collier obtained her B.A. from Howard University in 1948, then her M.A. from Columbia University two years later, and finally her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland in 1976. After obtaining her master's degree, she worked for five years as a caseworker for the Baltimore Department of Public Welfare. Then she found the calling to which she would devote most her life: education. She joined the faculty at Morgan State University in 1955 as an English instructor, and she lectured there and at other universities, including the University of Maryland and Howard University, until she retired in 1996. In 1969 Collier published "Marigolds," which won the Gwendolyn Brooks Prize for Fiction and continues to be widely read and anthologized. She's also published numerous scholarly and critical articles, as well as personal essays.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eugenia Collier's work takes place during the Great Depression and explores its effects on Black children. Racially motivated violence surged during the Depression, and many Black Americans experienced higher unemployment rates and fewer job opportunities than White Americans. Furthermore, many government-assistance programs, like unemployment benefits, had not yet been created, leaving people on their own during the difficult time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Much of Eugenia Collier's academic writing focused on Black American literature. Her dissertation analyzed Black American literary criticism, and in 1992, she coedited an anthology titled *Afro-American Writing*. Given her academic focus, it's no surprise that her fiction too is motivated by her love of Black literature and culture. Her predecessors and contemporaries include Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, two Black female authors whose writing focused on similar themes as Collier's. Hurston's best-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was noteworthy for its avant-garde focus on Black womanhood. Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was published the same year as "Marigolds" and similarly examines coming-of-age amid racial prejudice.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Marigolds
- **When Written:** 1969
- **Where Written:** Baltimore, Maryland
- **When Published:** 1969
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story, coming of age
- **Setting:** Rural town in Maryland
- **Climax:** Destroying the marigolds
- **Antagonist:** Miss Lottie, poverty
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

First Effort. "Marigolds," which won the Gwendolyn Brooks Prize for Fiction and remains Collier's most popular story, was also her first published story.

PLOT SUMMARY

When Lizabeth thinks about the dusty shantytown where she grew up, she remembers Miss Lottie's dazzling yellow **marigolds**. That, and the devastating moment when she became more woman than child.

At this time, the nation is in the middle of the Great Depression, though Lizabeth, her brother Joey, and their neighborhood friends are only vaguely aware of the extent of their poverty. One summer, when Lizabeth is fourteen, the children decide to go throw stones at Miss Lottie's marigolds. Miss Lottie is an old woman who lives in a ramshackle building with her disabled son, John Burke. The children scamper over to Miss Lottie's house and decapitate a few marigolds. Miss Lottie yells at them, but Lizabeth dances around her, mocking her and calling her a witch. Finally, John Burke jumps up and chases the children off.

Though the other children revel in the success of annoying Miss Lottie, Lizabeth feels ashamed. The child in her thinks it was all in good fun, but the woman in her flinches at the thought of the attack that she led. Lizabeth is in a bad mood all day and goes to bed upset. She wakes in the middle of night and overhears a conversation between her parents in the other room. Her father laments that he can't find work and provide for his family. He relies on his wife for financial support, which makes him feel emasculated. He begins to sob loudly and painfully. Hearing her strong, traditionally masculine father cry bewilders Lizabeth. Her mother then comforts him by humming soothingly, as if he were a child.

Lizbeth is baffled. Her dad is supposed to be strong, her mom soft. The world has lost its boundary lines. She wakes Joey because she doesn't want to be alone, and she runs out of the

house, toward Miss Lottie's marigolds. She leaps into the garden and pulls furiously at the flowers, destroying them all. Lizabeth looks up and sees Miss Lottie standing before her. This time, however, she doesn't view Miss Lottie as a witch. Instead, she sees a broken old woman who dared to create something beautiful amid so much ugliness. Lizabeth feels compassion for the first time in her life, completing her transformation from child to woman.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lizabeth – Lizabeth is the narrator of the story. From an unspecified moment later in time, she remembers a difficult summer in rural Maryland when she lost her innocence and came of age. That summer, Lizabeth, her brother Joey, and their neighborhood friends are living in poverty, surrounded by dust and ugliness. The only splash of color is Miss Lottie's **marigolds**, which the children hate because they're too beautiful—they stand out against the ugliness of the town. One day, Lizabeth and her friends start decapitating a few of the marigolds, which makes Lizabeth feel ashamed. This marks the beginning of her transformation to adulthood, because she's able to have complicated feelings about something that once would have felt simple to her. Lizabeth's truly devastating moment of transition comes later, after she overhears her father sobbing—apparently he's unable to find work, and his tears shake Lizabeth to her core, because she realizes that the world isn't as stable or understandable as she once thought. In her bewilderment, Lizabeth takes out her rage on Miss Lottie's flowers. She tramples and pulls them, destroying the entire garden, then looks up and sees Miss Lottie standing over her. But she sees Miss Lottie differently in this moment: she's not a witch, just an old woman who grew dazzling marigolds. Lizabeth feels compassion for the first time in her life, an emotion that signals the loss of her innocence and transition to adulthood.

Joey – Joey is Lizabeth's younger brother, and while Lizabeth is struggling with her transition from childhood to adulthood, Joey remains secure in his childish innocence. In this way he is often a foil to Lizabeth. It's Joey who initially suggests that they go and throw stones at Miss Lottie's **marigolds**, and afterwards, when Lizabeth begins to feel shame, Joey makes merry with the other children. Indeed, Joey sleeps blissfully through the conversation between his parents that so confounds Lizabeth, and Lizabeth's insights after destroying Miss Lottie's flowers remain hidden from Joey, who stands by, frightened, and begs her to stop.

Miss Lottie – Miss Lottie is the town's most impoverished resident. She's an old woman who lives at the edge of town in a ramshackle building with her disabled son, John Burke. While the circumstances of Miss Lottie's life seem particularly challenging, she still makes time to grow and nurture her dazzling **marigolds**. It would be easy for Miss Lottie to be bitter or resentful, but instead she cultivates beauty within poverty, courageously seeking to make her decrepit home, which the children call a "monument to decay," a better place.

Lizabeth's Father – Like nearly half of Black adults in America during the Great Depression, Lizabeth's father is out of work. Still, he goes to town every morning attempting to find a job. Lizabeth knows her father as a strong, traditionally masculine figure: he whisks children onto his shoulders, he whittles toys from wood, and he taught his children how to fish and hunt. So when she hears his loud, painful sobs in the middle of the night, her understanding of the world is rattled. Her father is not the rock of the family, but rather requires comfort like a child. Poverty has blurred simple binaries, and Lizabeth doesn't know how to grasp this new complexity.

Lizabeth's Mother – Lizabeth's mother has a job and provides for the family, but her job forces her to be absent from the house well into the evening. Like with her father, Lizabeth's understanding of her mother relies on simple binaries. These are challenged when she overhears a conversation between her parents late one night. She hears her father sobbing loudly, and her mother comforting him as if he were a child. Her mother, who she knew to be small and soft, now appears to be the strength of the family. Poverty has created a complex family dynamic and this event reveals to Lizabeth that reality no longer matches her simple view of the world.

MINOR CHARACTERS

John Burke – John Burke is the mentally disabled son of Miss Lottie. The children make a game of inciting him to rage.

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.

COMING OF AGE

When Lizabeth, the narrator of "Marigolds," thinks back to the summer when she was fourteen, she recalls the devastating moment when she suddenly became more woman than child: she, her brother Joey, and their friends destroyed the beloved **marigolds** of their elderly neighbor, Miss Lottie. This marked the end of Lizabeth's childhood, because her compassion for Miss Lottie in the aftermath was her first experience of seeing the world as complex—a defining trait of adulthood.

While tormenting Miss Lottie seemed funny to the children she was with, Lizabeth felt conflicted in the moment that she was first decapitating some of the marigolds: the kid in her said it was all in good fun, but the woman in her cringed at the thought of hurting an old woman. This inner conflict indicates that Lizabeth is no longer a child who can enjoy juvenile behavior without any remorse or further reflection. Later that night, Lizabeth has to confront even more complexity when she overhears her parents in the other room. Her father bemoans the fact that he can't find any work and has to rely on his wife to support their family. He sobs loudly, and Lizabeth's mother comforts him as though he were a child. This is the first time that Lizabeth has ever heard a man cry; she's bewildered that her strong father could be reduced to tears, and it makes her feel that her world is no longer as neat and ordered as she once thought.

Losing her innocence makes Lizabeth feel rage, and she sneaks out of the house and runs to Miss Lottie's garden. While she and her friends had previously only decapitated a few marigolds, now Lizabeth tramples the whole patch, ruining every flower. Lizabeth looks up and sees Miss Lottie watching the destruction, and for the first time in her whole life, Lizabeth feels compassion; she's just destroyed the thing that Miss Lottie values most, and she feels ashamed. The story says that this marks the end of Lizabeth's innocence, since children are innocent only as long as they accept things at face value. After Lizabeth destroys the marigolds, she is suddenly seeing a more complex truth: Miss Lottie is not a witch, but a broken old woman who dared to grow beautiful flowers. This marks Lizabeth's transition from childhood to adulthood.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY

When Lizabeth thinks about the shantytown where she grew up, what she remembers most is dust. She doesn't recall any green lawns or leafy trees—just brown, crumbly dust. Miss Lottie's sunny yellow **marigolds** provide the only splash of beauty and color in town, but Lizabeth and the other children hate those flowers. While the children don't understand why they hate the marigolds, the story suggests a reason: they find the flowers too beautiful—the marigolds stand out against the ugliness of the rest of the town. The implication seems to be that poverty and ugliness aren't so bad as long as it's all the children know, but when something like the marigolds reminds them of their difficult circumstances, it enrages them.

While the children hate the flowers for symbolizing something they can't access and don't understand—namely, beauty and a better life—Miss Lottie has a different attitude. She is the most destitute of all the town's residents, but the marigolds don't enrage her by reminding her of her misfortune. Instead, she cherishes them, spending her time planting and nurturing those flowers year after year, all summer long. If poverty and misery are represented by the absence of color, then Miss Lottie's colorful marigolds represent a resistance to misery. Though Miss Lottie lives in a ramshackle building and is ostracized by the town, she still has beauty and meaning in her life as long as she has her marigolds.

Lizabeth destroys the marigolds out of misguided rage, but she realizes their value immediately afterwards, regretting her childish behavior. Life can be as barren as a dusty road, and sometimes it takes courage and effort to find the beauty in it.

POVERTY

Lizabeth is a young African-American girl growing up during the Great Depression, and at the beginning of the story, she's ignorant of the extent of her poverty. She and her friends have no way of comparing themselves to others—they're too poor to have radios or magazines—so they don't see themselves as particularly poor. Nonetheless, they feel poverty's effects: Lizabeth feels as if she's in a cage, but her anger is vague and undirected, because she can't articulate what is wrong in her life.

It's not until Lizabeth overhears a conversation between her parents that she comes to understand the complexity of her family's class position: she hears her father lament that he can't find a job and provide for his family, which makes him feel inept and emasculated, and he begins to sob loudly and painfully. Lizabeth's mother comforts him by humming softly, as if he was a child. This event throws Lizabeth's understanding of the world into chaos: her father isn't the rock of the family that she believed him to be, and her mother is stronger than Lizabeth previously understood. Poverty has blurred simple binaries, forcing Lizabeth to confront the fact that her understanding of the world no longer matches reality. This revelation results in rage, which she unleashes on Miss Lottie's **marigolds**. After destroying the flowers Lizabeth is finally able to see who Miss Lottie really is: a woman who resists the misery of poverty not with anger, but by cultivating a beauty that improves the world around her.

SYMBOLS

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

MARIGOLDS

Miss Lottie's marigolds represent the possibility of a happy, beautiful life—even amid the dreariness of poverty. Lizabeth describes the shantytown where she lives as grim, dusty, and colorless. Since she's a child, she's not consciously aware of how poor she is, but she *does* see how miserable her surroundings are. At first, she despises the

marigolds for reasons that she can't articulate, but the story implies that their beauty is offensive to Lizabeth because it makes her circumstances look all the more drab by comparison. In other words, the beauty of the marigolds calls attention to Lizabeth's poverty, reminding her of a fact she usually doesn't have to acknowledge. If she didn't have to see the marigolds, her life would feel more straightforward and simple.

Lizabeth destroys the marigolds in a moment of losing her innocence: she has been presented with an uncomfortable truth about her life (that her father is struggling to provide for the family and is so sad about it that he sometimes cries). In order to make things seem simple again, she wrecks the flower patch. Perhaps she thought that by destroying the flowers, she could go back to a world where she didn't have to hold two complex ideas in her mind at once: that beauty can exist alongside poverty, or that her father can be both strong and weak. But after Lizabeth destroys the marigolds, she feels instant regret, and for the first time she sees that Miss Lottie isn't an old witch, but a courageous woman who has cultivated beauty in the midst of a difficult life. This marks Lizabeth's transition to adulthood, because she's finally able to see the complexity of the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Black Classic Press edition of *Breeder and Other Stories* published in 1994.

Marigolds Quotes

I don't know why I should remember only the dust. Surely there must have been lush green lawns and paved streets under leafy shade trees somewhere in town; but memory is an abstract painting—it does not present things as they are but rather as they feel.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Lizabeth recalls the shantytown of her youth, particularly the summer when she was fourteen and became more woman than child. This quote establishes memory as an imperfect instrument, one that warps reality around emotion. Memory does not function like a camera by capturing things exactly as they are; rather, it's better at capturing emotional responses to particular events or circumstances. Thus, Lizabeth should not be thought of as an unreliable narrator because she can't remember any grass; she's reliably narrating how her childhood felt to her, even if grass actually existed and she simply didn't notice it.

Lizabeth's recollection of her childhood will focus on her own interior response to the poverty that surrounded her—that's why she remembers the dust and not the green lawns or leafy trees. Poverty, symbolized here by the dust, had enormous implications on her development as a child. This story's framing gives Lizabeth the benefit of hindsight; she thinks back on her childhood and now can better understand the lingering effects that poverty had on her.

Poverty was the cage in which we all were trapped, and our hatred of it was still the vague, undirected restlessness of the zoo-bred flamingo who knows instinctively that nature created it to be free.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Lizabeth explains the general feeling of the town where she grew up. While the adults in town grasped not only that they were much poorer than other communities, but also that prejudice in America worked to keep them that way, the children were unaware of these truths. They have no access to things like radios or newspapers, so they have no method of comparing themselves to other communities. Poverty keeps them ignorant, like a cage. Still, the children feel the effects of poverty despite their ignorance. This results in anger, but because the children can't articulate exactly what's wrong, their anger is vague and often misdirected. Lizabeth's own misdirected anger results in the tragic climax of the story.

Miss Lottie's house was the most ramshackle of all our ramshackle homes.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker), Miss Lottie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This line establishes Miss Lottie as the poorest resident in Lizabeth's community. Given this, the fact that the children target her for amusement seems particularly cruel. But their ignorance about poverty renders them unable to feel any compassion for the old woman, so they continue with their game, not realizing that they're heaping cruelty and suffering on top of an already difficult life.

Additionally, it's important that the dazzling yellow marigolds—the town's only streak of color—flourish here, in the most destitute of places. It's an early indicator of one of the story's central themes: that beauty can thrive in poverty and misery, as long as someone is brave enough to care for it.

> For some perverse reason, we children hated those marigolds. They interfered with the perfect ugliness of the place; they were too beautiful; they said too much that we could not understand; they did not make sense.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Moments before they begin throwing stones, Lizabeth admits that she and the other children hate the marigolds. This quote reveals the reason: the flowers add a touch of beautiful color to a town characterized by its dusty insipidity. When judging by appearance, the town is easily identifiable as a drab, miserable place. The marigolds audaciously challenge this simple understanding. They suggest that beauty can flourish amid misery; that there exists a possibility for something better than squalor and dust. This quality draws the ire of the children. The marigolds are offensive to them because they call attention to their dismal surroundings—a reality the children would rather not acknowledge. If the marigolds were gone, Lizabeth and the other kids wouldn't be reminded that they're poor. Thus, their desire to behead the marigolds can be understood as a wish to remain in childish ignorance. The kids want their lives to be straightforward and simple, and the marigolds add unwanted complexity.

> Perhaps we had some dim notion of what we were and how little chance we had of being anything else. Otherwise, why would we have been so preoccupied with destruction?

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This quote further elaborates on why the children feel an impulse to destroy the marigolds. It's not just that the marigolds remind the children of how miserable their surroundings are—they're also frustrated that they may never have a chance to transcend this reality, so it's better to destroy something they might never have than accept that it's beyond their reach.

Lizabeth's complaint about how little chance they had to escape their misery subtly reminds the reader that it's not just poverty that's working against the community—they're also subject to racism. This is not just a story set in the Depression, after all, it's a story set in a Black community during the Depression. Because there are no white characters, it's easy to forget just how prejudiced American society was at this time. In this context the children's inclination to destroy becomes more understandable—they have a lot to be angry about.

> Suddenly I was ashamed, and I did not like being ashamed. The child in me sulked and said it was all in fun, but the woman in me flinched at the thought of the malicious attack that I had led.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker), Joey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Though Joey and the other children rejoice after destroying a few of Miss Lottie's marigolds, Lizabeth begins to feel shame. Joey often serves as a foil to Lizabeth; their reactions to different events highlight the age difference between them. This is one such moment. Joey, younger than Lizabeth and ignorant to the effects of his actions, celebrates with juvenile glee, while Lizabeth, now almost an adult, feels the first stirrings of empathy and suffers from

shame. She begins to think as an adult would. Lizabeth occupies a liminal position—not quite a child and not quite a woman. After this scene the balance tips toward womanhood, and Lizabeth will feel that her status as a child is quickly dissolving.

"Ain't no man oughtta eat his woman's food day in and day out, and see his children running wild. Ain't nothing right about that."

Related Characters: Lizabeth's Father (speaker), Lizabeth's Mother, Lizabeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

At night, Lizabeth overhears a conversation between her parents in which her father laments that he can't find work and must rely on his wife to provide for their family. Though most of the story centers poverty's effects on children, this moment examines its effect on men. The Great Depression caused millions of Americans to lose their jobs, and Black Americans were hit the hardest. It's not abnormal that Lizabeth's father doesn't have a job—nearly a third of Americans didn't. But he still feels deep shame. Poverty has emasculated Lizabeth's father, eroding gender dynamics that have persisted in American families for decades.

This moment also preempts the story's conclusion. Lizabeth's father feels shame for not acting in accordance with his understanding of manhood, just as Lizabeth will later feel shame for not acting in accordance with her newfound conception of womanhood.

The world had lost its boundary lines. My mother, who was small and soft, was now the strength of the family; my father, who was the rock on which the family had been built, was sobbing like the tiniest child. Everything was suddenly out of tune, like a broken accordion. Where did I fit into this crazy picture?

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker), Lizabeth's Mother, Lizabeth's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Late at night, Lizabeth overhears her father sobbing and her mother comforting him as if he were a child. This quote exemplifies the simple way that Lizabeth used to understand her family, and then the turmoil she experiences when this simple understanding proves false. Her old understanding relied on a simple binary: her father was the masculine rock of the family, and her mother was softer and more nurturing. Here Lizabeth is forced to confront that her parents are acting outside the binary. Her father is sobbing like a child, and her mother is the one providing for and holding the family together. Poverty has blurred easy boundaries, and Lizabeth now sees that her understanding doesn't match reality. Just as the marigolds invited Lizabeth's rage for challenging her simple conception of her town, this challenge to her worldview results in greater rage than she's expressed thus far.

I gazed upon a kind of reality which is hidden to childhood. The witch was no longer a witch but only a broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker), Miss Lottie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After destroying Miss Lottie's marigolds, Lizabeth looks upon the old woman in a new light. She no longer sees her as a witch, like the children still do. To view her as a witch would mean to rely only on appearances: an old, haggardly women living without a man in the woods. Instead, Lizabeth sees a reality hidden to children—one that's more complex and requires deeper insight. Miss Lottie is an old, broken woman who cares for her mentally disabled son without any help in a crumbling house—and she still finds time, every single summer, to grow her marigolds.

Lizabeth has developed empathy and now feels compassion for the old woman. One cannot have both compassion and innocence, because innocence requires an acceptance of things at face value. Lizabeth's feelings of shame and compassion mean that she's finally seeing a more complex truth, marking the completion of her transition to

womanhood.

For one doesn't have to be ignorant and poor to find that life is barren as the dusty roads of our town. And I too have planted marigolds.

Related Characters: Lizabeth (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Lizabeth has finished narrating her story, and now she's reflecting on the impact this experience had on her life. As a child, Lizabeth felt an impulse to destroy the marigolds. She resented them because their beauty reminded her of what her life lacked. As an adult, she appreciates the value of the flowers—she even plants them in her own garden. She knows that life can be miserable, even if you don't live in poverty. There are plenty of different cages in the world, after all. Rather than resign ourselves to misery, to commit to ignorance and destroy those things which remind us that life could be better, the story suggests that we should cultivate hope and beauty. For Miss Lottie and now for Lizabeth, marigolds are a method of resisting misery and oppression.

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.

MARIGOLDS

When Lizabeth recalls the town that she grew up in, the thing she remembers most is dust. Surely there must have been green lawns and leafy trees, but memory doesn't always present things as they were. So, it's brown, crumbly dust that stands out in her memory. That, and Miss Lottie's sunny yellow **marigolds**.

The defining feature of the impoverished town where Lizabeth grew up is brown, crumbly dust. This feature reflects the destitution of the town—it's so poor that there's very little beauty or interruption to monotony. Miss Lottie's dazzling yellow marigolds stand out as a beautiful streak of color amidst all the poverty and dust.

Whenever Lizabeth remembers Miss Lottie's **marigolds**, all the chaotic emotions of adolescence come flooding back. She's transported to a moment in Mrs. Lottie's yard, back when she was fourteen, when she suddenly became more woman than child.

The marigolds are linked to a transitional moment in Lizabeth's life—a moment of coming of age. This paragraph foreshadows the end of the story, when Lizabeth transitions fully to adulthood.

Lizabeth grew up in a shantytown in Maryland during the Great Depression. As she remembers it, her town was characterized by a general feeling of waiting; not for prosperity that white folks assured them was "just around the corner," nor for the success promised by the American Dream, because they knew better than to wait for those things. Instead, they waited for a miracle.

Though every community of people suffered during the Great Depression, the Black community had it especially bad. They faced the highest unemployment rate and the lowest wages. There were no government assistance programs, and prejudice still prevailed in the nation, so Black people often had no one to rely on but themselves. Thus, it's no surprise that the people in this community knew better than to wait for success and instead spent time waiting on a miracle.

As a child, Lizabeth and her friends were only vaguely aware of the extent of their poverty—they didn't have access to radios, newspapers, or magazines, so they couldn't compare their community to any others. Poverty trapped them like a cage, but their hatred of it was vague and undirected, like an animal at a zoo.

Lizabeth and the other children are too poor to afford radios or newspapers, so they live in a state of ignorance regarding their financial status, since they don't know that other people have it better than they do. But even though they don't know that they're less wealthy than other communities, they still vaguely feel the effects of their poverty. Poverty makes them feel trapped and desperate, but they can't articulate that poverty is at the root of these feelings. This will be significant when Lizabeth destroys the marigolds out of rage but can't articulate exactly why she's mad.

In her childhood, Lizabeth lives with her parents and her younger brother, Joey. Her older siblings have already left home, and two of her younger siblings have been given away to relatives who can better afford to care for them. Lizabeth's mother works as a domestic, and her father is unemployed. Still, he walks to town every day to try to find some work.

Poverty has torn apart Lizabeth's family. Her older siblings have left to find work themselves, and two of her younger siblings were given up because the family couldn't afford to care for them. It's also revealed that Lizabeth's mother supports their family while her father is unemployed, something that creates great tension later in the story.

During the summer Lizabeth and Joey spend most their days playing. They amuse themselves by doing things like drawing in the dirt or fishing for minnows with their bare hands. Lizabeth remembers feeling a strange restlessness during that time, almost like something old was ending and something new was beginning.

Lizabeth and Joey's hobbies reflect the impoverished state of their family; they have no money for toys or fishing poles. Additionally, the narrator again characterizes this time in Lizabeth's life as a moment of transition, even if she can't say exactly what's happening.

Lizabeth remembers the day that marked the end of her innocence. She is loafing under an oak tree when Joey and their friends ask her to find something for them to do. Joey suggests that they hunt locusts, but that's not fun anymore. Instead, Lizabeth proposes that they go annoy Miss Lottie.

That the children find pleasure in annoying an old woman reveals their youthfulness. They could choose to amuse themselves in a myriad of ways, but they specifically target Miss Lottie without feeling concerned that this is cruel. The story depicts this more as naïve than depraved—a symptom of their innocence, as they're not mature enough to empathize with Miss Lottie.

Bothering Miss Lottie is always fun, so the children scamper over to her house. Of all the ramshackle homes in their shantytown, Mrs. Lottie's house is the most decrepit. Its rickety frame is like a house built from cards; a brisk wind might blow it over. There's no porch or shutters, the wood is all rotting, and the lot has no grass—the house is a monument to decay.

Of all the residents in this impoverished shantytown, Miss Lottie is the poorest of all. Yet, as mentioned previously, the children have a difficult time grasping the implications of poverty. Thus, while they recognize the dilapidated state of Miss Lottie's house, they view her without any sympathy or compassion.

John Burke, Miss Lottie's son, sits on a rocking chair in front of the house. He is known as "queer-headed" and likes the chair because of the squeak-squawk sound it makes when it rocks. Usually John Burke is unaware of what happens around him, but if you intrude upon his fantasies he becomes enraged. The children have made a game of angering John Burke and then eluding his attacks.

That Miss Lottie cares for her mentally disabled son alone makes her life incredibly challenging. It would be challenging even if she wasn't poor, but her poverty only compounds her difficulties. The children, of course, understand none of this complexity. Instead, they make a game of annoying John Burke, cruelly aggravating a disabled man.

The real fun, however, is in annoying Miss Lottie. She's at least one hundred years old. Miss Lottie was tall and powerful when she was young, but now she's bent and drawn. Miss Lottie never left her yard, and nobody ever came to visit her. Some of the children used to think she was a witch, but they're too old to believe in that now.

Miss Lottie cares for her son and home despite her age and deteriorating body. The children's classification of her as a witch reveals their ignorance. They see an old, haggard woman living without a man in the woods, and they think of witches. It's a callous assumption based on simple appearances, and it reveals their juvenile tendency towards fantasy and lack of empathy.

When the children see Miss Lottie, she's bent over working on her **marigolds**. Her flowers are particularly dazzling because they're surrounded by so much dust and decay. Miss Lottie nurtures her marigolds all summer, every summer, even while her house falls to ruin.

Marigolds are annuals, so Miss Lottie has to plant and nurture them every summer. She does this despite her poverty and the demands of her life. Her effort results in a symbol of beauty at the center of a destitute property in a destitute town, a sign that one can live a good life even under miserable circumstances.

The children hate the **marigolds** for their beauty—they interfere with the perfect ugliness of the town. The way Miss Lottie cares for the flowers, and destroys the weeds surrounding them, intimidates and upsets the children, though they can't explain exactly why. The children decide to annoy the old woman by throwing stones at her flowers.

The children reside in a state of innocence, rendering them unable to articulate exactly why they hate the marigolds. Yet, it's suggested that the flowers challenge their simplified worldview. All the children know of the world is their dusty, drab town—the flowers don't fit in. They hint at the possibility of something better: a life full of beauty. But this life is inaccessible to them, so they choose to take their anger out on the flowers.

As the children begin to gather stones, Lizabeth hesitates. She's torn between wanting to join in the fun and feeling that it all is a bit silly. Joey provokes her by asking if she's scared. Lizabeth responds by spitting on the ground, a gesture of phony bravado, and says that she'll show the children how its done.

Lizabeth's moment of hesitation exposes her ambivalent position. An adult would condemn these actions, while a child would participate in them. Lizabeth is stuck between these options, but in this moment, she chooses to cling to her youth.

Lizabeth wonders if, as children, they were not more aware of their poverty than she previously claimed: if they didn't recognize the cage that poverty trapped then in, then why were they so bent on destruction? Anyway, the children gather the stones and Lizabeth leads them towards Miss Lottie's garden.

Though the children aren't able to articulate the reasons behind their feelings, their inclination to destroy the marigolds indicates some level of awareness about the poverty that traps them. The effects of the Depression are felt by people everywhere, even children.

Lizabeth throws a stone and cuts the head off one of the **marigolds**. Miss Lottie yells, then Joey chucks a stone and beheads another marigold. Miss Lottie struggles to her feet, leaning on her rickety cane, and shouts at the children. More stones are thrown, and Miss Lottie cries for John Burke to come and help her.

By destroying the marigolds, the children are making their environment more simple: they're removing the audacious reminder of the beauty that could fill their town, but doesn't.

Mad with the power of inciting Miss Lottie's rage, Lizabeth runs out of the bushes and chants "Old lady witch, fell in a ditch, picked up a penny and thought she was rich!" while dancing around the old woman. The other children join in too, but then John Burke runs out and chases them all off.

By identifying Miss Lottie as a witch, Lizabeth is attempting to reinforce her status as a child. She's adhering to a simple understanding of the world, one where Miss Lottie is not a poor old woman, but a witch who lives in the forest.

Though the other kids are in a state of merriment after their fun, Lizabeth suddenly feels ashamed. She's conflicted: the child in her says it was all in good fun, but the woman in her cringes at the thought of the malicious attack. She's in a funny mood all day and hardly notices her father's silence and mother's absence during dinner that night.

Lizabeth teeters between childhood and womanhood. The children around her celebrate, but she feels shame—an indication that she's beginning to think as an adult. She goes home, but her parents, who are also suffering from the effects of poverty, aren't able to help Lizabeth through this transition.

Lizabeth wakes in the middle of the night and hears her parents talking through the thin walls that separate their rooms. Her father is ashamed that his wife is working and he isn't, and he laments that "no man oughtta eat his woman's food day in and day out, and see his children running wild." Despite his daily efforts, he can't find a job and doesn't know what to do.

Just as Lizabeth begins to feel the first stirrings of shame, she goes home and finds that her father struggles with shame of a different origin. The Depression has left him without work, and despite his daily efforts he can't find a job. He relies on his wife to provide for the family, which makes him feel emasculated.

Her father begins to sob, loudly and painfully. Lizabeth has never heard a man cry before—she didn't know that men ever cried. She covers her ears with her hands, but she still hears her father sobbing. Her father is a strong man—he can whisk a child upon his shoulders, he can whittle toys from wood, and he can hunt. How could it be that he is crying?

Lizabeth's image of her father as a strong, traditionally masculine man dissolves when she hears him cry. She believes in simple maxims: children cry, not men. The complexity of poverty's effects on her family's life is beginning to be revealed, and Lizabeth is having trouble processing it—after all, she's still partially a child.

Finally, Lizabeth's mother comforts her father by humming to him, as if he were a frightened child. Lizabeth is bewildered; her mother, who was small and soft, is now the strength of the family. Her father, who was the rock on which the family had been built, is sobbing like a child. The world had lost its boundary lines.

Lizabeth's understanding of her family has been totally obliterated: her mother is the strong provider that her father used to be, and now her father is sobbing like a child. Lizabeth's understanding of the world no longer matches the reality that she witnesses, and this is traumatic and confusing for her.

Lizabeth lies awake even after her parents have stopped talking and gone to sleep. She feels scared and lonely, so she decides to wake Joey. She can't tell Joey how she really feels, so she says that she's going out, knowing that the promise of an adventure will entice Joey to come along.

Lizabeth's world is in chaos. She's nearing the end of her transition to womanhood, something that makes her feel lonely. Often, when children are distressed and confused, they act out, which is what Lizabeth is about to do here.

Lizabeth runs as if the furies are after her, and Joey follows. She stops at Miss Lottie's yard. Her emotions swell to a bursting point—she's exasperated by her mother's constant absence, crushed by the hopelessness of her poverty, bewildered by her changing body, and afraid of her father's tears. She experiences an overwhelming impulse to destroy.

Just as the flowers incite the children to rage because they challenge their simple understanding of the town, Lizabeth is now enraged because her simple understanding of her family has been upended. Her world is no longer ordered and easily comprehendible, and she reacts with rage.

Lizabeth leaps into Miss Lottie's garden and pulls furiously at the **marigolds**, destroying the perfect golden flowers. She's sobbing and Joey begs her to stop, but she continues trampling and pulling the flowers until all of them are ruined.

This is the culmination of the destructive feelings that have manifested in the children as a result of their poverty. It is the last act of Lizabeth's childhood.

Lizabeth stops sobbing, opens her swollen eyes, and sees the age-distorted body of Miss Lottie standing in front of her. There is no rage in her face, since her garden has already been destroyed and there is nothing left to protect. Lizabeth scrambles to her feet, and it's at that moment when her childhood fades and her womanhood begins.

Now that all the flowers are ruined, both Miss Lottie and Lizabeth are bereft of their anger. Miss Lottie's reaction is a clue to Lizabeth's emotional state: Miss Lottie isn't angry because the marigolds are already gone, so her anger only results from wanting to protect something. Lizabeth was angry out of a desire to protect something, too: her own innocence. But she couldn't protect it, and now that her innocence is gone, she is no longer angry.

As Lizabeth gazes into Miss Lottie's eyes, she sees a kind of reality that's hidden from children. She sees that Miss Lottie is not a witch, but only a "broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility." She had lived a life in squalor, and whatever joy was left in her had gone into those **flowers** that she had so lovingly cared for. And now those flowers lay in ruin.

Now that Lizabeth has completed her transition from child to woman, she's able to see Miss Lottie in a new light. She no longer sees a witch; instead, she recognizes the difficult circumstances that Miss Lottie overcame in order to grow her flowers. Lizabeth's understanding no longer relies simply on appearances—she's incorporating empathy and broader complexity into her view of the world.

Standing before Miss Lottie, Lizabeth feels ashamed and cannot express her thoughts aloud. Looking back on this moment, Lizabeth recognizes it as the end of her innocence—for innocence involves an acceptance of things at face value, with no thought to the area below the surface. When she looked into Miss Lottie's eyes she felt the beginning of compassion, and one cannot have both compassion and innocence.

Now that she's able to comprehend the complexity of Miss Lottie's circumstances, Lizabeth is also able to feel compassion. Children's innocence—their simplified worldview—prevents them from feeling compassion. This emotion, like shame, is one reserved for adults.

Now, years later, Lizabeth lives far from the dust and squalor of her shantytown. She knows that Miss Lottie died long ago, and that she never planted **marigolds** again. Yet, Lizabeth still thinks about those marigolds every now and then—one doesn't have to live in poverty to know that life can be as barren as a dusty road. And Lizabeth too has planted marigolds as an adult.

Lizabeth's misguided rage destroyed Miss Lottie's garden forever. As an adult Lizabeth comes to understand the value of planting marigolds, and she does so in her own garden. Rather than the destroying the things of beauty that give us hope, we should work to cultivate that beauty, to resist misery and plant hope amidst oppression.

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