The Taste of Watermelon

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BORDEN DEAL

Borden Deal spent his early years on his parents' farm in rural Mississippi, where he found lifelong passions for fishing and reading. After losing their farm during the Great Depression, the family relocated to a communal farming project. Deal then left home at the age of sixteen, after his father died in a truck accident. For the next decade, he worked many different jobs, including fighting wildfires with the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Pacific Northwest, harvesting wheat as a migrant laborer, and serving as an aviator cadet in the US Navy during World War II. In 1946, the author attended the University of Alabama, where he studied English, creative writing, and the philosophies of Carl Jung. He published his first short story, *Exodus*, in 1948, while still in university. He then went abroad for graduate school at Mexico City College, where he met his first wife, Lillian Slobotsky. This marriage produced one child but ended quickly in divorce. In 1952, Deal moved to Alabama and married the author Babs Hodges, with whom he would have three children before their divorce in 1975. In 1956, he began a prolific career of full-time writing, ultimately publishing twenty-one novels and over one hundred short stories. Much of his work depicts the daily lives of rural Southerners, often centering on their connection to land. During his four-decade writing career, Deal won multiple awards, including the 1957 Guggenheim Fellowship. A year after marrying his third wife, Patricia Deal, the author died of a heart attack at the age of 63.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Deal romanticized small-scale Southern farming communities at the very time when those communities were declining due to urbanization. In "The Taste of Watermelon," the narrator experiences the tension between the rural and the urban, as his family moved from "town" to the rural community where the story is set. In reality, when Deal was writing this story in the 1970s, many southerners had moved in the opposite direction, leaving their rural communities for urban areas. When Deal was growing up in the 1920s, the Southern economy was based largely in small-scale agriculture and deep racial division, a system created after the Civil War to preserve the power of the ruling white elite. However, the Great Depression began to unravel this system, as many rural Southerners, including Deal's family, were forced to sell their farmland during the economic crash. The 1933 introduction of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal agency that provided public infrastructure to the South, built up Southern urban centers in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. At the same time, through the Great Migration, many Black agricultural workers relocated to northern urban areas to escape white supremacist terrorism, contributing further to the decline of the Southern agricultural economy. This urbanization continued through the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, Deal was writing in a time of Southern identity crisis: the increasingly urban Southern communities of the 1970s looked very little like the rural Southern communities Deal had grown up in. By writing about a harmonious community of small-scale farmers, Deal is processing this changing Southern identity, and possibly expressing nostalgia for the South of his childhood.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Deal's writing grew out of the literary traditions of the Deep South, where the author spent much of his life. In many ways, "The Taste of Watermelon" echoes Mark Twain's famous novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884. Although Deal wrote almost a century after Twain, both stories use a white southerner colloquial dialect to track a young boy's adventures as he comes of age in the rural South, and both Twain and Deal draw on a collective white Southern identity. Additionally, Deal would have been inspired as a young writer by the Southern Renaissance movement, a literary period when Southern authors of the 1920s and 1930s began receiving more literary acclaim for their realistic representations of Southern communities. William Faulkner was one of the most renowned authors within this movement, and his 1931 short story collection, *These 13*, depicts the daily lives of rural Mississippians. While "The Taste of Watermelon" similarly describes rural Southerners' daily lives, Deal's narrative style differs greatly from Faulkner's experimental stream of consciousness style. Deal's much more straightforward narration stems in part from his reading of the German philosopher Carl Jung, who theorized that all of humanity shares a "collective unconscious," made up of ancient symbols, mythologies, and emotions. In a 1968 article, "Storytelling as Symbolism," Deal explains his belief that through narrative story-telling, the author taps into this shared unconscious state. For this reason, Deal's writing style focuses heavily on straightforward narrative, using his characters' everyday lives to explore themes that he believed were timeless and universally human.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Taste of Watermelon
- **When Published:** 1979
- **Literary Period:** Post World War II Southern Fiction
- **Genre:** Short story

- **Setting:** A small agricultural town in the rural American south
- **Climax:** The narrator apologizes to Mr. Wills
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Wills
- **Point of View:** first person

EXTRA CREDIT

Eclectic Work. Deal worked many odd jobs before becoming a full-time writer, including being a "skip tracer," a private investigator who locates people who have attempted to escape legal problems.

Anonymous. Deal's highest grossing series was published under the pseudonym, "Anonymous," and only revealed as his writing after his death. The series consisted of nine sexually explicit novels.

PLOT SUMMARY

The sixteen-year-old narrator wants to fit in with his new community. Although he is friends with Freddy Gray and J.D., they don't completely trust him yet, because his family has just moved to their rural community the year before. The three boys want to date the narrator's neighbor, Willadean Wills. But they are afraid of her father, Mr. Wills, who is a talented and intimidating farmer. He grows watermelons behind his barn, and he is more protective of those melons than anything else. Even though it's a well-known rite of passage for teenage boys in the community to sneak melons from farmers' fields, Mr. Wills won't let anyone near his.

This summer, Mr. Wills is growing the biggest **watermelon** anyone has ever seen, and he plans to save its seeds for next year. One night, the boys go swimming under a full **moon** and sit on the river bank and talk about Mr. Wills, who has guarded his "seed melon" every night with a **shotgun**. According to Freddy Gray and J.D., Mr. Wills loads his gun with lethal buckshot, instead of the salt pellets farmers usually use. The narrator, astounded that Mr. Wills would go to such lengths for a melon, surprises himself and his friends by announcing that he plans to steal the melon that very night. Freddy Gray and J.D. protest, telling him that it's too risky under the bright full moon, but the narrator's mind is made up. So the trio sneak over to the woods behind Mr. Wills's watermelon patch.

Mr. Wills is sitting at his post, his gun gleaming in the moonlight. The narrator crawls the 200 yards over to the giant watermelon, covered by the tall grass in the patch. After finally reaching the melon, he lies down in the field and contemplates carving his name into the melon instead of stealing it, but he decides that in order to prove himself to Mr. Wills and Willadean, he must take the melon. He then laboriously rolls the melon out of the patch, terrified of getting shot. But he makes it out unscathed, and the three boys carry the melon back to the creek. They haven't eaten half of it by the time they are full, so they destroy the rest of the melon, depressed at the waste, but unable to share the leftovers with anyone. They say goodbye sullenly.

The narrator returns home in time to see Mr. Wills realize that the melon is missing. The farmer runs up and down the patch, destroying all the other melons in an animalistic rage that horrifies the narrator. Ashamed, the narrator runs up to his room, and contemplates his crime until dawn. He feels terrible that he stole the melon with so little thought of the consequences, and he knows he has to try to repair the damage he caused. In the early morning light, he goes back to the creek and collects the watermelon seeds. He then knocks on Mr. Wills's door and offers him the seeds. Mr. Wills reveals that his sick wife had planned on inviting the neighborhood over to eat the melon. When the narrator apologizes, Mr. Wills admits that he is also ashamed of destroying the rest of the watermelon patch. He then asks the narrator to help out on his farm next year. The narrator agrees, looking up to see the smiling eyes of Willadean behind her father. Finally, he asks Mr. Wills if he had buckshot in his gun, and the farmer shows him that the gun was only filled with salt pellets. Assured of Mr. Wills's good character, the narrator commits himself to working hard for him next year.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The story's narrator is a sixteen-year-old boy who has just moved to a rural Southern community, and the story traces his coming of age. In the beginning, he still feels like an outsider to his town, and he's trying to fit in with his new friends, Freddy Gray and J.D. who seem skeptical of him. Like his two friends, he has a crush on Willadean, his sixteen-year-old neighbor. One late summer night, in a youthful act of bravado, the narrator decides to rebel against the terrifying Mr. Wills, Willadean's father, who he thinks is a cruel and irrationally angry man. He does so by stealing Mr. Willis's prized "seed **watermelon**," the biggest watermelon the community has ever seen. Only after eating the watermelon with his friends does the narrator begin to understand the consequences of his actions; Mr. Willis is so distraught that he destroys the rest of his crop before revealing that he had planned to give the watermelon to the ailing Mrs. Wills in order to cheer her up. Ashamed, the narrator retreats to his room and realizes that he stole the watermelon out of an immature desire to fit in with his friends and impress Willadean. The next morning, the narrator decides to try to repair the damage, and he collects the watermelon seeds and gives them back to Mr. Wills, despite his fear of Mr. Wills's anger. Mr. Wills forgives him and asks that the narrator make amends by working on his

farm the next year, and the narrator readily agrees. By the end of his character arc, the narrator has learned the importance of thoughtfulness, hard work, and honesty.

Mr. Wills – Mr. Wills is the best and most intimidating farmer in the community. While he can grow anything on his land, his method of farming involves yelling and "fight[ing] the earth." Combined with his large physical stature, this behavior makes him seem terrifying to his neighborhood, including the narrator and his two best friends. The summer the story takes place, Mr. Wills is growing the biggest **watermelon** the community has ever seen, and he is very protective of it, standing guard over it every night with his **shotgun** instead of letting teenage boys raid his watermelon patch as the other farmers do. The narrator's parents criticize him for watching over the watermelon more than his own wife, who is sick and rarely ever leaves the house. The community also gossips that he fills his shotgun with buckshot, which could kill, rather than the salt pellets farmers usually use. However, after the narrator steals Mr. Wills's watermelon, Mr. Wills reveals the reason for his vigilance over the melon: he had planned to give it to Mrs. Wills, who in turn had planned to give it out to the entire neighborhood in an effort to make friends. In a devastated rage, Mr. Wills destroys the entire watermelon patch. But the next morning, when the narrator apologizes for stealing the watermelon, Mr. Wills is no longer angry. Instead, he expresses how hurt he is by the narrator's actions, and he admits his own shame at having destroyed the rest of the watermelons the night before. He then asks the narrator to help out on his farm next year, since the narrator's own father does not farm. In this way, Mr. Wills becomes a role model for the narrator by the end of the story, showing the importance of not judging people too quickly.

Willadean – Willadean is the narrator's sixteen-year-old neighbor, a tall, slender girl who, in the past year, has begun to mature. Freddy Gray remembers how the year before, Willadean had played children's games. But this year, she refrains from those games, and instead walks in a way that fascinates the narrator and his friends. All three of the friends are secretly vying to take her out on a date, but none of them can build up the courage to ask, because they're scared of her father, Mr. Wills. The narrator realizes that part of the reason he feels like an outsider with Freddy Gray and J.D. is that they are afraid Willadean might like him more than them, because he is new to the neighborhood. So, partly in order to prove himself to Willadean, the narrator steals her father's prized **watermelon**. But when he sees Willadean and her mother standing in the kitchen doorway, watching Mr. Wills destroy the melon crop, he realizes that he has not won Willadean's approval at all. The next morning, she answers the door when the narrator comes to apologize to her father, and he can't bear to look at her; when he finally does, he can't figure out how she feels about him. But when he agrees to work for Mr. Wills, he sees that her eyes are smiling. Emboldened, he says he would be "willing to set on the porch with Willadean anytime," and she blushes in response but doesn't seem angry. In this way, the narrator has won Willadean's approval—not through his rash bravado, but through his braver qualities of honesty and compassion. Their small interaction at the end of the story holds the potential for a deeper relationship, in which the narrator treats Willadean as a person instead of an object.

Freddy Gray – Freddy Gray is one of the narrator's new friends in the neighborhood. Along with J.D., the three teenage boys form a "bunch." Their relationships to each other are still childish: they are "still young enough" that they need the bunch to feel secure, rather than acting independently as adults, and they are not able to communicate about the dynamics "under the surface" of their relationship. One of these dynamics is that the narrator is new to their rural community, having moved from town, so the two boys don't totally trust him yet. Before the narrator steals the **watermelon**, Freddy Gray seems to be the unofficial leader of the group. He speaks with more authority than the others, and he is the first one to jump in the water when they go swimming. He is also the one to challenge the narrator to steal the watermelon. Afterwards, though, the narrator assumes leadership of the group, as he digs into the watermelon first and then graciously offers that the two others "help themselves" to his stolen prize. In this way, the narrator wins himself more belonging in the group by stealing the watermelon, although that belonging comes with the steep price of shared guilt for their actions.

Mrs. Wills – Mrs. Wills is Mr. Wills's wife. She has been sick all year, and as a result, she is a very thin woman with pale skin. She sometimes sits on the porch for an hour or two, but she never visits with anyone else in the neighborhood. After the narrator steals the giant **watermelon**, Mr. Wills reveals that Mrs. Wills loves watermelons and had asked him about the progress of the "seed melon" every day. It was a symbol of hope for her, as she looked forward both to the meat of the melon itself and to enjoying the crop of giant watermelons that the melon's seeds would bring the next year. Later, when the narrator apologizes to Mr. Wills, he learns that Mrs. Wills had not wanted the melon all for herself, but was instead hoping to share the melon with the whole neighborhood. This caring gesture suggests that people are not always what they appear. While the Wills family had appeared antisocial out of choice, Mrs. Wills had actually craved connection with her community.

The narrator's father – The narrator's father does not farm like the other fathers. Instead, he still works in the town the family moved from. He seems to have grown up in a similar rural community, as he fondly remembers raiding watermelons as a rebellious teenage rite of passage. When Mr. Wills destroys his watermelon patch after finding out his prized **watermelon** has been stolen, the narrator's father models a brave, caring masculinity by trying to stop Mr. Wills's destruction, despite

being smaller than him. His reaction to learning that the narrator has stolen the watermelon also demonstrates thoughtfulness and care, as he does not angrily reprimand his son, but instead goes over to the Wills house to help his son apologize.

MINOR CHARACTERS

J.D. – J.D. is one of the narrator's best friends, along with Freddy Gray.

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 AND MASCULINITY

In "The Taste of Watermelon," the 16-year-old narrator comes of age, particularly by finding a way to belong to the world of men. At the beginning of the story, the narrator and his two friends are still boys. They're interested in dating their neighbor, Willadean Wills, but they never talk to her because they are afraid of her father. And they are "still young enough" that they seek the security of belonging in a "bunch" of friends, rather than having the maturity to strike out after their individual desires on their own. But one night, after swimming with the boys at the creek, this changes. The narrator decides to defy his friends' protests and steal a giant **watermelon** from Willadean's father, Mr. Wills. The watermelon is both a stand-in for Willadean herself (whom he intends to impress by stealing the watermelon), and a way to differentiate himself from the boys and earn their respect as a man.

However, after successfully stealing the melon only to waste most of it, the narrator returns home to find out from a devastated Mr. Wills that the watermelon was supposed to cheer up the ailing Mrs. Wills, who had looked forward all summer to sharing it with the community. Rather than feeling like a man, the narrator feels foolish and ashamed. To make amends, he brings the watermelon seeds to Mr. Wills the next morning, apologizes for his crime, and makes a plan to work on the Wills farm the next year. After the conversation, the narrator looks up to see the smiling eyes of Willadean; what won her over wasn't foolishly stealing the watermelon in an act of misguided bravado, but having the courage to apologize and return the seeds. The narrator's coming of age moment is therefore not his rebellious stand against Mr. Wills, but his much braver act of finding compassion for the man he feared, owning up to his mistakes, and committing himself to the hard work of repairing the damage. In this way, the story suggests that true maturity and masculinity lie not in rash rebellion but in the more thoughtful qualities of honesty, compassion, and hard work.

RUSHING TO JUDGMENT

Through the hidden kindness of Mr. Wills, "The Taste of Watermelon" suggests that people are not always what they seem. The sixteen-year-old narrator and his family have recently moved next door to Mr. Wills, an intimidating and talented farmer. He is a big man who seems quick to anger, and he never visits with anyone in the community, which others find weird. For this reason, when Mr. Wills obsessively guards an especially large **watermelon** growing on his farm, the narrator's family judge him for acting selfishly, assuming that he's being needlessly possessive and that, by devoting himself to his melon, he's neglecting his sick wife. Finally, when the narrator hears a rumor that Mr. Wills's **shotgun** holds lethal bullets instead of the salt pellets farmers normally use, he feels sure that Mr. Wills is a cruel tyrant, overly protective both of his watermelon patch and his attractive teenage daughter. This motivates him to steal Mr. Wills's prize melon, partly to rebel against his perceived cruelty.

However, the events of the story show that the narrator was wrong to assume that Mr. Wills was unkind and tyrannical. After stealing the enormous watermelon, the narrator learns that Mr. Wills was growing the watermelon for his sick wife, who was planning on sharing it with the entire neighborhood. Far from acting selfishly, Mr. Wills's devotion to the watermelon was an act of love for his wife and an act of hope that they might become woven into the wider community. The family's antisocial nature turns out to be due to Mrs. Wills's illness and Mr. Wills's overwork, as he does not have a son to help out on the farm. Ultimately, when the narrator admits to his crime, Mr. Wills forgives him readily, reveals that his gun was only filled with salt pellets, and suggests that the narrator repay him by helping him farm next year. In this way, the story reveals that superficial judgments often hide a more complex truth—perceived villains might simply be misunderstood.

EXCLUSION, CRUELTY, AND BELONGING

Many characters in "The Taste of Watermelon" struggle to feel included in the rural farming community where the story is set. The sixteen-year-old narrator feels like an outsider even among his two best friends, as he moved there only a year before the events of the story, and his friends still seem skeptical of him. The Wills family also seem to be outsiders in the community, as they do not socialize much with their neighbors. But each of these characters longs to belong to their community: the narrator wants to earn the acceptance of his friends, and the Wills family turns out to be trying to get friendlier with their neighbors. A

big question of the story, then, is how one can successfully belong.

The narrator's initial quest for acceptance comes at a huge cost: to impress his friends, he steals the giant **watermelon** from Mr. Wills's farm. But after destroying the watermelon, the narrator and his friends quickly part ways, feeling guilty and depressed and not particularly connected to one another. Worse, the narrator then learns that Mr. Wills was growing the melon to cheer up his chronically ill wife, who was looking forward to sharing the watermelon with the neighborhood. By stealing the watermelon to fit in with his friends, the narrator crushed the Wills's plans for acceptance in the community. Not being accepted himself, he knows that he's done something grave. But the narrator redeems himself in a way that helps both him and the Wills family feel more connected: he apologizes to Mr. Wills and agrees to work on the Wills farm the next year to help make up for this year's loss. In doing so, he builds a relationship with the Wills family, finally linking these neighbors together. The narrator's initial attempt to belong—stealing the watermelon—backfired because it was rooted in cruelty, which doesn't bring people together. By contrast, the narrator's sincere apology and offer of help begins to weave him into the community. In this way, the story suggests that community can only be built on kindness and sincerity, not bravado and cruelty.

MORALITY

"The taste of Watermelon" examines the morality of a small farming community. At the beginning of the story, the narrator believes that his neighbor, Mr. Wills, is acting immorally, because he won't allow teenage boys to steal watermelons from his field, a commonly accepted "rite of passage" in the community. The narrator's parents support this notion, criticizing Mr. Wills for protecting his watermelon patch so obsessively. However, after stealing Mr. Wills's giant **watermelon**, the seeds of which Mr. Wills intended to use for planting next year's crop, the narrator realizes that he is the one who disobeyed the town's moral code: in stealing the "seed melon," the narrator not only wasted the bulk of the fruit, which should have been shared with the community, but also stole the seeds that would have made the community the site of "the greatest melon crop in the world." As such, the story's morality centers the good of the community rather than the benefit of any individual. The normal theft of watermelons is not seen as crime because it is an outlet for teenage boys' rebelliousness, and as such, is good for the community. But the narrator's theft of the seed watermelon is a crime, not because it is theft of private property, but because it places the narrator's individual desires over the benefits that the watermelon would have brought to everyone. Ultimately, the narrator rights his transgression by bringing the seeds back to Mr. Wills and promising to work on the Wills farm next year, thus re-committing himself to the communal good. In this way, the story suggests that individual profit should be second to communal benefit.

ILLICIT SEXUALITY AND ACCEPTABLE ROMANCE

In "The Taste of Watermelon," the narrator navigates his budding sexuality within the strict moral codes of the farming community where his family has recently relocated. The narrator and his two friends share a common romantic interest in Willadean, a neighbor whose father, Mr. Wills, terrifies them. In part to impress Willadean, the narrator steals Mr. Wills's "seed **watermelon**," the biggest watermelon ever grown in the community, and his two friends eat the watermelon illicitly, hiding in the woods behind Mr. Wills's house. The watermelon and Willadean are parallel objects of sexual and romantic interest throughout the story: they both attract male attention, and Mr. Wills feels the need to protect both of them from that attention. Furthermore, the descriptions of the narrator's desire for the watermelon are highly sexual: the narrator imagines "the sweet red juices oozing over his tongue," and once he has stolen the watermelon, his pocketknife "penetrate[s] the thick green rind," splitting the watermelon so that it "l[ies] open before" the three boys. However, this implied illicit sexuality results in moral catastrophe, as the narrator and his friends feel disgusted by their actions and realize the harm they have brought to the Wills family. By contrast, when the narrator apologizes to Mr. Wills for his crime, he and Willadean commence a much more acceptable romantic relationship within the community's moral code, with the tacit approval of the adults present. The narrator offers to "set on the porch with Willadean anytime," making Willadean blush and the two teenagers' fathers laugh. By comparing these two opposing sexual and romantic experiences, the story suggests that teenage romance is acceptable, but only within the context of honesty (and with permission from adults).

SYMBOLS

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

WATERMELON

From the beginning of the story, references to the watermelon parallel references to the feminine. The watermelon, like Willadean, is the object of male attention: just as the three boys scrutinize Willadean's manner of walking and appearance without any true intent of talking to her, they talk idly about stealing the melon without really meaning to do it. In both cases, the boys objectify the feminine, fantasizing

about seizing it by force, rather than relating to it respectfully. Further, the melon even attracts "men from miles around to look at it," reinforcing it as an object of male desire. As a result, Mr. Wills protects the melon as he would a female member of his family: the narrator notes that Mr. Wills "would rather you stole Willadean than his melon," and the narrator's parents criticize Mr. Wills for paying more attention to the melon than to his own sick wife. The melon attracts this male attention not only because of its size, but also because of its feminine quality of carrying life: it is Mr. Wills's "seed melon," meaning that, like a woman who can become pregnant, the melon carries the promise of next years' melons within it.

When the narrator and his friends steal the melon, they disrespect this feminine object. Although the community tacitly condones teenage boys' watermelon raids, the melon's feminine quality of fertility exempts it from that agreement: as the narrator's father says, "wouldn't anybody steal a man's seed melon." Therefore, when the boys steal the melon, they disobey these communal norms about respecting femininity. The sexual wording in the descriptions of the narrator's desire for the melon, as well as the boys' wasteful consumption of the melon, suggest that the theft is a violently non-consensual act. However, this shameful experience teaches the narrator to respect the real women in his life, rather than treating them as sexual objects. By returning the melon's seeds to Mr. Wills after reflecting on his actions, the narrator shows that he now understands the need to respect femininity. Through that interaction, he begins to relate far more respectfully to Willadean, looking into her eyes rather than objectifying her body to his friends. By the end of the story, the watermelon has therefore come to symbolize the importance of respecting women.

MOON

The full moon represents the narrator's youthful bravado: its light at first seems to bring clarity and strength, but then in hindsight it seems to have enchanted them into folly. When the night starts, the full moon illuminates deceptively; it is "almost as bright as day, but softer and gentler than daylight could ever be." This misleading light inspires over-confidence in the boys, making them "feel as though [they could] do anything in the world." Tricked by this deceptive confidence, the narrator also rushes to judgement about Mr. Wills, foolishly believing the town's gossip about him. Finally, the moon inspires the narrator to steal Mr. Wills's **watermelon** that very night, as he concludes it would be most heroic to steal the melon when Mr. Wills could easily see him. The moon therefore encourages the boys' bravado.

However, by the end of the night, the moon's enchantment has worn off, and the narrator sees his confidence as youthful folly. After witnessing the consequences of his actions on Mr. Wills's family, the narrator is grateful when the moon sets, bringing "a welcome darkness into the world." With the deceptive moon gone, the narrator can see the true motives behind his own actions: instead of standing up for what was right, he realizes that he was only "acting out of pride." Ultimately, true clarity comes to the narrator only in "the gray light of dawning," when he has the idea to help Mr. Wills plant the watermelon seeds next year. The moonlight therefore represents youthful bravado, while daylight brings mature understanding.

SHOTGUN

Mr. Wills's shotgun symbolizes the importance of vulnerability in masculine roles. In the beginning of the story, the gun is, in the community's eyes, an expression of Mr. Wills's over-the-top masculinity. The narrator's first description of Mr. Wills' gun links the weapon to what he perceives as Mr. Wills' hyper-masculine, irrational anger, as he describes Mr. Wills watching his **watermelon** patch vigilantly, often with a gun under his arm. By guarding the melon every night with his shotgun, Mr. Wills projects an image of an obsessive and cruel father and husband: the narrator's parents assume that he is neglecting his sick wife in his vigil over the melon, and the narrator thinks he cares more about the melon than his own daughter. The community furthers this impression by spreading the rumor that he loads his gun with buckshot: they believe that Mr. Wills is so irrationally over-protective of his property that he would kill someone to save a watermelon. Through all this gossip about the gun, the community therefore draws norms around masculinity and concludes that Mr. Wills deviates from those norms.

However, after the watermelon is stolen, the story ties Mr. Wills's gun to a new expression of vulnerability, bringing him back within the accepted boundaries of masculinity. By "hurling the shotgun over his head" when he realizes the melon is gone, Mr. Wills' throws away the symbol of overprotection. While the destructive rampage that ensues horrifies the narrator, Mr. Wills ends that destruction by talking quietly and "crying in such strength," demonstrating a level of vulnerability he had not shown before. Far from ignoring his wife, Mr. Wills reveals that he was protecting the watermelon so diligently because he wanted to give it to her to cheer her up. The gun therefore comes to represent his care for his family. Further, when the narrator confesses, instead of angrily reaching for his gun as the narrator expects, Mr. Wills is vulnerable and honest, communicating his pain at having lost the watermelon and his shame at his own destructive behavior. Finally, by showing the narrator that the gun was really filled with salt pellets the whole time, Mr. Wills proves that he was not being irrationally overprotective, but instead acting within communal norms. By the end of the story, the gun therefore demonstrates Mr. Wills's model masculinity, one that now expresses vulnerability and care as well as strength.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

The Taste of Watermelon Quotes

"She was my age, nearly as tall as I, and up to the year before, Freddy Gray told me, she had been good at playing Gully Keeper and Ante-Over. But she didn't play such games this year. She was tall and slender, and Freddy Gray and J.D. and I had several discussions about the way she walked.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Willadean

Related Themes:

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Willadean introduces the story's coming-of-age theme by exploring maturity and childhood. One of the big changes the narrator experiences as a sixteen-year-old is a new interest in girls, a sign that he is growing up. Part of his interest in girls is a curiosity about adulthood. One of Willadean's intriguing characteristics is that she quit playing children's games despite being good at them, a detail that suggests a new sense of maturity. But by mentioning that Willadean had been good at those games, the narrator shows that he is still invested them; he has not matured as much as she has. This description therefore sets the tone of the story, revealing the narrator as a boy desiring adulthood but not entirely sure how to attain it.

The description also objectifies Willadean's body. Because the three boys are afraid to talk to Willadean, they don't know a lot about her. So they talk about her pleasing physical attributes: her height, her figure, and her gait. By talking about her body amongst themselves, rather than talking to her, the boys treat her as an object instead of a person with an emotional interior.

"Mr. Wills was the best farmer in the community. My father said he could drive a stick into the ground and grow a tree out of it. But it wasn't an easy thing with him. Mr. Wills fought the earth when he worked it. When he plowed his fields, you could hear him yelling for a mile. It was as though he dared the earth not to yield him its sustenance.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Wills

Related Themes:

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's introduction of Mr. Wills establishes the story's connection between masculinity and hard work. As the "best farmer in the community," Mr. Wills serves as a role model for masculinity in the neighborhood, to the extent that the narrator's own father talks approvingly about Mr. Wills's abilities. He has not earned that respect by tapping into some innate talent: farming isn't "an easy thing with him." Rather, he has become the best farmer in the community by hard work and struggle, by "fighting the earth." His masculinity is rooted in his hard work.

The passage is also important to the story's theme of not rushing to judgement. The community sees his aggressive farming style and assumes he is a naturally angry and cruel person. The narrator describes Mr. Wills's angry farming practices in order to explain why he was so afraid of the farmer. However, by the end of the story, it is clear that Mr. Wills is actually kind. His anger, then, is likely a symptom of his stress, about both his farm and his wife's illness. By learning this backstory, the narrator understands the importance of not judging people superficially.

"The moon floated up into the sky, making everything almost as bright as day, but at the same time softer and gentler than ever daylight could be. It was the kind of night when you felt you can do anything in the world, even boldly asking Willadean Wills for a date. On a night like that, you couldn't help but feel that she'd gladly accept.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Willadean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

On the night the boys go swimming, the deceptive full moon symbolizes their youthful bravado. The imagery in this quote reveals the moon's deception: the light is so bright that it is almost day, but it distorts reality by erasing the harsh facts of daylight and replacing them with "soft" and

"gentle" illusions. This light encourages the boys to disregard the consequences of their actions, making them think they "[can] do anything in the world."

In reality, the boys' actions do have consequences. In his certainty that Willadean would want to go out on a date with him, the narrator forgets to consider her wishes. This same overconfidence drives the narrator to steal the seed melon without considering the consequences for the Wills family. In this way, the story suggests that considering the consequences of one's actions distinguishes bold bravado from true courage.

> It surged up out of me – not the idea of making my name for years to come by such a deed, but the feeling that there was a rightness in defying the world and Mr. Wills.
>
> Mixed up with it all there came into my mouth the taste of watermelon. I could taste the sweet red juices oozing over my tongue, I could feel the delicate threaded redness of the heart as I squeezed the juices out.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Wills

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

Rationalizing his decision to steal the melon, the narrator makes himself believe he's acting morally by trying to steal the melon, since he falsely assumes that Mr. Wills deserves this cruelty. However, the details of the passage suggest that he knows his decision to steal the melon is not fully moral and is rooted to some extent in self-deception.

Using the passive voice to describe that the idea of stealing the melon "surged up out of [him]," the narrator evades responsibility—he implies that he himself did not come up with this idea, but instead it just arrived in his mind without his participation. This turn of phrase suggests that the narrator knows that the theft of the watermelon was shameful, as he's trying to distance himself from having come up with it. Additionally, the narrator's insistence that he was not stealing the melon for admiration is clearly false: the narrator chose to steal the biggest melon on the brightest night because he thought that achieving this difficult task would win him belonging in his friend group. Finally, by stating his selfish desire to taste the watermelon directly after claiming the moral high ground, the narrator further demonstrates his morally impure motives—clearly he's in this for personal pleasure, not moral righteousness.

> I met a terrapin taking a bite out of a small melon. Terrapins love watermelon, better than boys do. I touched him on the shell and whispered, "Hello, brother," but he didn't acknowledge my greeting. He just drew into his shell. I went on, wishing I was equipped like a terrapin for the job, outside as well as inside.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator is crawling towards the seed melon, he encounters a terrapin, a kind of small turtle. This detail carries several thematically important meanings.

First, the terrapin's rejection is yet another example of the narrator's exclusion in his new rural home. The terrapin is a common pest for farmers in the neighborhood, but the narrator may not be too familiar with it, having recently moved to the area from town. When he jokingly greets the terrapin as a "brother," he hopes for inclusion in this new setting, much the same way as he hopes that Freddy Gray and J.D. will trust him. But like the two boys keeping their distance from the narrator, the terrapin also treats the narrator as an outsider. It is partly this feeling of exclusion that motivates the narrator to steal the watermelon in the first place.

Second, the detail exposes the childish foolishness of stealing the watermelon. By recognizing that he shares a goal and an enemy with this common pest, the narrator admits that he is acting as an irresponsible child making a nuisance. If he were a responsible adult, he would be growing crops, not stealing them. Additionally, by contrasting himself with the terrapin, he admits that he is not "equipped" for this theft. Not only does he lack an exterior shell to protect him from Mr. Wills's possibly lethal bullets; he also lacks the terrapin's internal wisdom. While the terrapin acts carefully, withdrawing into his shell when he perceives a threat, the narrator acts brazenly, putting himself in danger.

> We gorged ourselves until we were heavy... We gazed with sated eyes at the leftover melon, still good meat peopled with a multitude of black seeds...
>
> "There's nothing we can do," J.D. said. "I can just see us taking a piece of this melon home for the folks..."
>
> We were depressed suddenly, it was such a waste, after all the struggle and the danger, that we could not eat every bite. I stood up, not looking at the two boys, not looking at the melon.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Freddy Gray, J.D.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

This description of the boys eating the melon, and their depression afterwards, suggests that their actions are immoral. The act of eating the melon takes on slight religious connotations through the passage's references to the Catholic sins of gluttony, greed, and lust. The boys "gorge[]" themselves in an act of gluttonous over-eating; they have stolen the melon out of greed, and now they have to hoard it in order to avoid detection; and the previous descriptions of the narrator's first bite of the melon have distinctly sexual undertones, making the word "sated" convey a satisfied lust. Consuming the melon therefore appears sinful.

The boys' "depression" is due to their shame at having committed these immoral actions. By "not looking" either at the boys or the melon, the narrator indicates that he feels guilty about these sins. Although he does not know the full consequences of stealing the melon, he recognizes that he has acted against his community's morals.

> Mr. Wills was tearing up and down the melon patch, and I was puzzled by his actions. Then I saw; he was destroying every melon in the patch. He was breaking them open with his feet, silent now, concentrating on his frantic destruction. I was horrified by the awful sight, and my stomach moved sickly.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Wills

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

Watching Mr. Wills find the seed melon missing and destroy the whole patch in his rage and grief, the narrator realizes how much pain he has caused the farmer. The extent of Mr. Wills's devastation clearly astounds the narrator. Although he felt ashamed at the waste of the watermelon earlier, he has not yet thought about how the theft will affect the Wills family. By becoming aware of the consequences of his actions, the narrator makes the first step towards adulthood.

The narrator's horror also comes from seeing his earlier immoral destruction reflected back to him. When destroying the seed melon earlier, the narrator "methodically" crushed the melon with his feet. Mr. Wills's concentration when stomping on the rest of his melons mirrors that cold violence, forcing the narrator to see the violence in his own act of destruction. Thus, he is horrified not only by the sight of Mr. Wills destroying his own melon patch out of anger, but also by the memory of violently destroying the seed melon itself.

> Watermelon raiding was a game, a ritual of defiance and rebellion by young males. I could remember my own father saying, "No melon tastes as sweet as a stolen melon," and my mother laughing and agreeing.
>
> But stealing this great seed melon from a man like Mr. Wills lay outside the safe magic of the tacit understanding between man and boy.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mr. Wills

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

Reflecting shamefully on his mistake, the narrator reveals the irony of stealing the melon in order to be included in the community. Although he has only recently moved to the area from town, the narrator's parents seem to be from the area, as they remember watermelon raiding in their youth. By stealing the melon to fit in to the community, the

narrator is attempting to inherit that tradition from his parents, and ultimately fit into the world where they grew up.

But by stealing the "great seed melon from a man like Mr. Wills," the narrator violates the community's norms, proving that he is still an outsider in that world. The seed melon lay beyond the bounds of the watermelon raids because it is too valuable: stealing it would be a malicious attack on a farmer's crop for next year, as well as a selfish act of hoarding. Additionally, Mr. Wills is not a player in the watermelon raids, perhaps because of his own status as an outsider. In this context, the phrase "a man like Mr. Wills" implies that the community thinks of him as in some way exceptional. Whether he got that status because his neighbors admire his farming skill, pity his ailing wife, or fear his temper, it seems to be common knowledge that he is excluded from the raids. In trying to prove his membership in the community, the narrator ended up showing how little he understood the community's norms.

"I'm about as ashamed of myself last night as you are of yourself," Mr. Wills said. He frowned at me with his heavy brows. "You ruined the half of it, and I ruined the other. We're both to blame, boy. Both to blame."

Related Characters: Mr. Wills (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

By admitting that he shares some of the blame for the destroyed watermelon crop, Mr. Wills demonstrates that masculinity can be vulnerable and honest. The narrator had entered the conversation expecting to be met with aggression and cruelty, as he thought Mr. Wills would shoot him with lethal bullets. Even though he thought he was rebelling against Mr. Wills's aggression, the narrator himself had actually displayed that kind of aggressive masculinity in his callous theft and violent destruction of the watermelon.

But instead of violence, Mr. Wills is vulnerable with the narrator, admitting that his anger destroyed the rest of the crop. Having previously described Mr. Wills as "big man," and "the best farmer in the community," the narrator has shown that he sees the farmer as role model for masculinity. While Mr. Wills has previously only modeled an aggressive masculinity, his honest confession therefore shows the narrator that men can be vulnerable.

He broke the shell in his strong fingers and poured the white salt out into his palm.

"You see?" he said.

"Yes, Sir," I said, taking a deep breath. "I see."

I went on, then, and the next year started that very day.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Mr. Wills (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

After agreeing to work on Mr. Wills's farm in the next year, the narrator remembers to ask the farmer about his gun, which is rumored to contain lethal bullets instead of non-lethal salt pellets. By breaking the shell and revealing the salt, Mr. Wills gains the narrator's trust. Consequently, the narrator sees that he greatly misjudged Mr. Wills.

The rumor that the gun contained buckshot was the final straw that motivated the narrator to steal the watermelon in the first place, as it proved to the narrator that Mr. Wills was a cruel person who would kill over something as banal as a watermelon. Therefore, when Mr. Wills pours a salt pellet into his hand, he disproves that rumor, showing the narrator that he is a reasonable and trustworthy person. The clean whiteness of the salt symbolizes the restoration of his sullied image in the narrator's eyes.

With this trust established, the narrator can immediately begin to repair the damage he caused in his relationship to Mr. Wills, starting "the next year... that very day."

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.

THE TASTE OF WATERMELON

The Narrator's family has recently moved from town to a farming community. He has friends in the new place (Freddy Gray and J.D.), but he still feels like an outsider. This trio of boys are interested in Willadean, a girl their age who lives in the house next to the narrator. Willadean no longer plays children's games, she is "tall and slender," and she walks in a way that intrigues the boys. But they do not talk much to her because they are afraid of Willadean's father, Mr. Wills, who is a big, terrifying man with fierce eyes.

Having just moved from a more urban location, the narrator does not feel that he belongs to the rural community yet. Clearly, he's thinking about what it might take for him to belong. Additionally, the reference to Willadean's changes in the past year alert the reader to the coming-of-age nature of the story. While Willadean appears mature, the narrator and his friends still act childishly, afraid to talk to Willadean because they are scared of her father. This shows that, as the story begins, they're boys still, not yet men.

Mr. Wills is the best farmer in the community, but he does not make it look easy. He "[fights] the earth" when he farms, yelling loudly. He is especially good at growing watermelons, a tricky crop that some men struggle to grow. He is very protective of his watermelon patch, which he plants in between his barn and the creek, and he has no notion of sharing his melons with the boys of the neighborhood.

The narrator thinks that Mr. Wills is quick to anger and potentially even violent, as his farming style is very physical and antagonistic. The fact that he doesn't share his watermelons immediately paints him as possessive and potentially even selfish, setting up his alienation from the community.

The rest of the farmers in the community expect to lose a certain portion of their watermelons to the regular pests: terrapins and neighborhood boys. It isn't thought of as stealing for boys to "borrow a sample" of the crop, although if they are caught, the farmers might shoot them with salt pellets. You only break the rules of the game if you step on a lot of melons, destroying the farmer's crop. But Mr. Wills "[doesn't] think that way."

The watermelon raids illustrate the neighborhood's communal values. Rather than prioritizing individual farmers' private property, the community finds more value in giving teenage boys a harmless outlet for their rebellion, which in turn benefits the whole community. At the same time, the farmers' economic security is top priority: the boys can't destroy the farmers' crops in their raids. Showing these community norms points to Mr. Wills's difference from everyone else: he's perceived as more possessive and more violent, making him fearsome.

Mr. Wills is growing the biggest **watermelon** anyone has ever seen, right in the middle of his patch. Men travel miles to see it, although he won't let them enter the patch. All the boys in the area daydream about stealing it, including the narrator, Freddy Gray, and J.D. But they don't actually plan on doing it, not only because they are afraid of Mr. Wills's anger, but also because Mr. Willis sits guarding the melon every night, looking out his hayloft window with his **gun**. He hopes to plant the seeds from the big watermelon next year so he can grow a field of giant watermelons. It seems like he "would rather you [steal] Willadean than his melon."

Throughout the story, references to the giant watermelon parallel references to Willadean. Like Willadean, the watermelon is an object of male attention, with the men traveling miles to see it and the boys daydreaming about stealing it. And just as Mr. Wills's anger prevents the boys from talking to Willadean, Mr. Wills also protects the watermelon from male attention. By joking that Mr. Wills would rather someone stole Willadean than the melon, the narrator suggests that Mr. Wills selfishly values his property over his family.

The narrator and his parents often watch Mr. Wills guarding his **watermelon** at night and gossip about it. His father thinks it is silly to guard it, because no one would think of stealing a man's seed melon. His mother thinks Mr. Wills should be taking care of his wife instead of the melon. Mrs. Wills has been looking sick and pale all year, and she barely ever leaves the house. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Wills visits with anyone in the community.

The narrator's parents also judge Mr. Wills for being selfish, as they assume that he is neglecting his ailing wife when protecting the watermelon from thieves. This gossip again illustrates the community's morality: family should come before personal pride. The narrator's parents therefore judge Mr. Wills as an outsider to these norms, an impression made stronger by the fact that the Wills family never visits with anyone else in the community. At the same time, the gossip reiterates the importance of respecting farmers' crops and livelihood, as stealing Mr. Wills's seed melon is an unthinkable crime because the theft would destroy Mr. Wills's entire crop for the next year. Destroying an entire year's crop is unacceptable because of the financial and emotional loss that such a theft would bring to the farmer and his family.

Around the time the **watermelon** should be ripe, there is a full **moon**, and the three boys decide to go swimming in the creek. The moon rises, illuminating everything in a light almost as bright as daylight but softer. The night makes the narrator feel like he could do anything. Freddy Gray says he would like to take Willadean out, and the others laugh at him but secretly agree: they are reaching an age where that kind of thing is starting to sound like fun. At that time, the narrator was both "part of the bunch" with J.D. and Freddy Gray, but also "left out of certain things." In this case, he was left out because J.D. and Freddy were afraid that Willadean might like the narrator more than them because he was new to the area. They didn't talk about that tension, but all three boys felt it.

In this passage, the full moon gives the boys a false confidence, as it enchants them with deceptively clear light. During the harsh light of day, they would be too afraid to ask Willadean out, but under the "soft" moon, they feel certain that Willadean would want to go out with them. Additionally, the passage again represents the narrator as an outsider to the group, since the two boys are afraid that Willadean will like him more than them because he is new to the area. By not talking about this tension, the boys show that they lack mature vulnerability in their relationship.

The narrator tells his friends that the night is so bright he could read a newspaper. Then they reach the swimming hole and race to jump in the water. Freddy Gray jumps first. The water is cold, and it "strikes a chill" into them, but they warm themselves up with a water fight. Finally, all tired out, they sit on the bank and look up at the **moon**.

The boys' water fight again demonstrates their immaturity, recalling how the more mature Willadean has stopped playing games. Also, the fact that Freddy Gray jumps into the water first demonstrates his leadership in the group.

Freddy Gray says no one would dare steal Mr. Wills's watermelon on a bright night like this, and J.D. says that on his walk tonight, he saw Mr. Wills guarding the melon anyway, with his "**shotgun** loaded with double-ought buckshot." The narrator is astounded: double-ought buckshot "would kill a man." But his friends assure him that it's true, Freddy Gray heard it from his father, who heard it from Mr. Wills.

The community's gossip about Mr. Wills further excludes him from moral norms, suggesting that he would commit murder in order to protect his watermelon. This rumor aligns with the narrator's judgment of Mr. Wills as a cruel and angry man, so he chooses to believe it as truth, despite its dubious origins as gossip.

The thought of the buckshot in Mr. Wills's **gun** bothers the narrator: who would kill someone over a **watermelon**? Freddy Gray wonders why the narrator is so angry, asking him half-jokingly if he was planning on stealing it. The narrator says that he actually was thinking of stealing it, surprising himself as much as his two friends. Even as an adult looking back on that night, the narrator doesn't know why he said that. He remembers it coming from a mixture of origins—his desire for Willadean, his anger at Mr. Wills, and his feeling like an outsider with the two boys. He remembers feeling that "there was a rightness in defying the world and Mr. Wills." Also, he could already taste the sweet juice of the watermelon in his mouth.

In this passage, Freddy Gray again acts as a leader of the group by challenging the narrator. In accepting the challenge, the narrator acts out of insecurity as an outsider: having moved recently, the narrator needs to prove that he belongs to his new community by engaging in the rural rite of passage of stealing a watermelon. But by choosing the biggest watermelon on the brightest night, the narrator shows that he not only wants belonging, but also admiration, both from his friends and from Willadean. He rationalizes this desire by villainizing Mr. Wills, insisting that he morally right to steal the melon. However, the expectation of the sweet watermelon in his mouth reveals that the narrator is really motivated by self-gratification.

The narrator tells his friends he intends to steal the **watermelon** that very night. They protest, telling him the **moon** is too bright and he will surely get caught. But the narrator insists on doing it despite his fear, because "it is too late to stop... Besides, [he doesn't] want to." The narrator leads the way to the edge of Mr. Wills's watermelon patch, where they hide behind willow trees and watch Mr. Wills sitting in the barn, holding his **gun** under the moonlight.

Again, the narrator's selfish desires and youthful bravado override a more rational assessment of the situation. Not only is the moon very bright, making the narrator visible, but Mr. Wills is also protecting the watermelon with a gun rumored to contain buckshot. The narrator may therefore be risking his own life by stealing it, and his reasons for doing so seem hazy and even suspect, as it seems like he's trying to gain the admiration of his friends and Willadean by doing something selfish and even cruel.

The narrator enters the patch by crawling flat on his stomach, looking back once at his friends' white faces watching from the willows. He sees a terrapin eating a small melon and wishes "he was equipped like a terrapin for the job, outside as well as inside." At every move, the narrator expects Mr. Wills to see him, but the tall grass covers him. Finally, he reaches the enormous **watermelon**, which is even bigger than he imagined. He lies still for five minutes, wondering how he will carry the watermelon out and why he's there in the first place. He decides that, more than "just bravado," he is "proving something to [him]self—and to Mr. Wills and Willadean."

By wishing that he was more like a terrapin (which is a type of turtle that is very good at stealing melons) "outside as well as inside," the narrator is wishing for the turtle's interior wisdom as well as his armored exterior. However, when he gets to the watermelon, he reveals that he lacks that wisdom. At this moment of reflection, he still cannot see that his attempt to "prove something" to himself, Mr. Wills, and Willadean is also an act of selfish bravado.

He considers just carving his name into the **watermelon** but decides he needs to actually take it. So he breaks the stem. Mr. Wills yawns. The narrator shoves the melon back through the path in the grass he made crawling into the field. The melon is so heavy he can barely push it, and the dust he is creating makes him want to sneeze. He expects to be shot at any moment. But he reaches the edge of the field, feeling a hundred years older, and collapses. After a quick rest, he climbs back under the willows. His friends grab him and start to celebrate the victory, but the narrator urges them to continue on, since Mr. Wills could still catch them.

The trial of wrestling the watermelon is so physically and emotionally challenging that the narrator feels much older when he reaches the edge of the field. While the narrator thought that proving himself by stealing the watermelon would make him a man, his true coming of age moment has yet to happen—stealing the watermelon was not, in fact, an act of maturity. But for now, the narrator's actions have won his friends' admiration, as they now defer to him for leadership in this adventure, rather than Freddy Gray.

The three boys carry the **watermelon** back to the swimming hole, almost dropping it three or four times because it's so difficult to carry. At last, they reach the hole and put the melon down, panting. Excited, they decide to eat it before someone finds them with it. The narrator "penetrates" it with his pocket knife, which he thinks is more respectful than bashing it open with their fists, and the melon splits in half by itself. The narrator takes the first bite, closing his eyes as he enjoys the sweet, moist heart meat, still warm from the day's sun. It tastes exactly as he imagined it would; it is the most delicious watermelon he has ever had. He "graciously" invites his two friends to "help [themselves]" to the melon.

This passage shows how the watermelon is a sexualized feminine symbol. The description of the narrator's first bite of melon appears sexual, with the narrator's knife "penetrating" the melon, and the melon seeming to act of its own volition, opening itself for the narrator, and offering its "warm" and "moist" meat. Additionally, this passage demonstrates how the adventure has placed the narrator in a new leadership role among his friends, as he eats the melon first and then offers it to them "graciously." Finally, this passage reveals the narrator's skewed sense of morality: he thinks that by stealing the melon, he has made the melon his. And by opening it with a knife, he believes he is being more respectful than breaking it, even though the underlying theft is the real source of disrespect.

After eating all they can, the boys haven't even consumed half of the **melon**. Realizing that they can't share the watermelon with anyone else, they become depressed at all the wasted melon. The narrator says that he has to go home, and he begins to stomp on the leftover melon, destroying it. Freddy and J.D. watch him until he throws a chunk of melon at them, and then they join in the destruction, laughing. Looking around at the strewn rinds and seeds, they all agree that they couldn't have done anything else. But the depression follows them home, and they say goodnight to each other quietly. The narrator doesn't feel proud anymore, even though he knows the adventure has brought him closer to his friends.

The friends' depression comes from their knowledge that they broke communal norms and behaved cruelly. By stealing the melon, they hoarded it selfishly, instead of sharing it with the entire community. Their act of stomping the rest of the melon to erase the evidence of the crime recalls the one rule in watermelon raiding: never stomp on the crop. Although the narrator does not fully comprehend the consequences of his actions, he can tell that something is not right. The three friends are bonded in this experience of guilt, but that kind of belonging is not the kind of inclusion the narrator hoped for.

When he gets home, his father asks him where he has been, and the narrator tells him he was swimming. The narrator looks over at Mr. Wills's barn and sees Mr. Wills in the field under the **moonlight**. He watches as Mr. Wills reaches the spot where the watermelon should be, and unable to find it, he lets out a "strangled cry" that "chilled [the narrator] deep down...like the cry of a wild animal." Mr. Wills throws his **shotgun** away from him and begins running up and down the field. At first, the narrator can't figure out what he's doing, and then he realizes that Mr. Wills is destroying every melon in the patch. The narrator feels sick to his stomach.

The wasted watermelon depresses the narrator, but witnessing Mr. Wills's devastation at the loss of the melon shocks the narrator to his core. In a community that prioritizes farmers' crops, Mr. Wills's destruction of his own crop illustrates how terrible the watermelon's loss is to him. The narrator feels so guilty at seeing this animalistic grief that he is physically sick.

The narrator follows his father into the **watermelon** patch, passing Mrs. Wills and Willadean, who are huddled in the kitchen doorway. The narrator's father asks Mr. Wills what is going on and Mr. Wills screams back, "they've stolen my seed melon." The narrator's father bravely grabs Mr. Wills with both arms, but Mr. Wills punches him and shoves him to the dirt. Mr. Wills then returns to his destruction, with his eyes full of fury. Attempting to stop Mr. Wills, the narrator's father chases him, but each time he gets close, Mr. Wills bats him away. Finally, Mr. Wills stops in the spot where the big watermelon grew and looks around at the destroyed patch.

The narrator's father models a mature masculinity in his care for his neighbor. The narrator notes how brave he is to try to stop Mr. Wills's destructive rampage, despite the fact that he is smaller and weaker than the farmer. This masculinity is different than the narrator's previous boyhood bravado in stealing the watermelon, when he acted bravely to cause destruction, rather than prevent it.

Mr. Wills tells them that he had been planning to give the **watermelon** to his wife, who has been sick since the spring. He planned on saving the seeds to plant the "greatest melon crop in the world" next year. Every day, his wife would ask him if the giant melon was ripe yet. The narrator looks at the two women standing in the doorway and runs home, straight to his bedroom. All that night, he can't sleep and watches the **moon** fall until it disappears, bringing a "welcome darkness." He feels the shame of having committed such a crime "out of pride," without regard for its meaning. He has heard many men reminiscing about stealing watermelon in their youth, but stealing Mr. Wills's seed melon is something different.

The neighborhood has judged Mr. Wills for being a selfish and cruel man, neglecting his family in favor of hoarding the watermelon for himself. However, this passage reveals the consequences of rushing to judgement prematurely, as Mr. Wills was guarding the watermelon not out of selfishness but out of devoted care for his wife. Additionally, the setting moon symbolizes the narrator's humility as he finally realizes the pain his actions have brought to the entire Wills family. Finally, an irony of the narrator's theft is that in trying to fit in to the farming community, the narrator proves himself to be an outsider still, since he committed the unthinkable crime of selfishly destroying a farmer's crop "out of pride." In destroying a farmer's livelihood, the narrator has violated the community's moral code.

When daylight arrives, he walks towards the swimming hole, where the wasted **watermelon** greets him, reminding him of Mr. Wills's destructive rampage last night. He collects all the watermelon seeds he can find in a paper bag, crawling around on the ground for the last ones. When he returns home, his father asks him if he was afraid of Mr. Wills last night, and the narrator responds by asking his father to come over to Mr. Wills's house with him immediately. His father suddenly understands and asks the narrator if he stole the seed melon. But instead of responding, the narrator tells him, with a slight tremble in his voice, that he is afraid Mr. Wills will shoot him if he goes alone. The narrator's father agrees quietly, and they walk together over to the Wills' house.

This passage demonstrates the narrator's new-found maturity. In collecting the watermelon seeds, the narrator demonstrates that he understands the gravity of having stolen Mr. Wills's seed melon and he wants to try to repair the damage by bringing the seeds for the farmer's future crop back. In doing what is right despite his crippling fear of Mr. Wills, the narrator finally acts bravely instead of acting out of bravado.

Willadean opens the door and fetches Mr. Wills, who appears in the doorway looking tired from the night. He asks absentmindedly what the narrator wants. Full of fear, the narrator holds out the bag of seeds, telling him that they are from the **seed melon**. Mr. Wills asks if he stole the melon, and the narrator confesses. Instead of grabbing his **shotgun**, like the narrator expects, Mr. Wills leans down towards the narrator with gleaming eyes and asks him why he stole it. The narrator responds that he doesn't know, and Mr. Wills reveals that his wife had planned to invite the whole neighborhood over to eat the melon together. Even more deeply ashamed, the narrator apologizes. He finally looks at Willadean, who is standing behind her father, but he can't see any emotion in her eyes.

The revelation that Mrs. Wills wanted to share the melon with the entire neighborhood again demonstrates the consequences of rushing to judgement. The narrator and his parents had not seen Mrs. Wills as a full person. They had pitied her as a victim of her illness and the supposed cruelty of her husband, but they had never thought of her as someone who wanted to be included in the community through friendship. By stealing the watermelon, the narrator took away Mrs. Wills' hope for inclusion. Additionally, the narrator's honest apology shows the extent of his new maturity, as he is able to own up to his mistakes and acknowledge the pain they caused. The fact that he does this while Willadean is watching, even though he deeply desires her approval, suggests that he has learned to value moral integrity over self-gratification.

Mr. Wills tells the narrator that he also feels ashamed of his actions last night, since they both ruined the melon crop together. The narrator can only respond with a thought he had in the early light of the morning: he offers to help Mr. Wills with next year's melon crop. Mr. Wills looks at the narrator's father and explains that he has no sons himself, and he needs a boy to help on the farm. Mr. Wills puts his hand on the narrator's shoulder and says that even though they can't do anything about this year, they'll "grow next year together."

Mr. Wills's vulnerability in admitting fault demonstrates a different kind of masculinity than his previous displays of anger. It is this caring and vulnerable masculinity that allows the narrator to trust him enough to offer to work with him in the next year. In making that plan, the narrator is able to find the belonging he had craved in his new community: his hard work will replace his status as an outsider with a sense of belonging. The Wills family, too, will fulfill their desire for more connection with their neighbors through this agreement with the narrator's family. Therefore, although the narrator's mistakes still have consequences that can't be repaired, he has been able to heal some of the pain he caused.

Agreeing, the narrator looks again at Willadean, whose eyes are now smiling, and feels his heart beat in his chest. He blurts out that they don't need the seed melon to get people to visit them; he can sit on the porch with Willadean anytime. The two men laugh at this, and although Willadean blushes, she doesn't look angry. The narrator starts to turn around to go home, but realizes he has one last question for Mr. Wills. "Was there double-ought buckshot in that **gun**?" Mr. Wills picks up the gun and takes out a shell. Breaking it with his fingers, he pours white salt into his hand. The narrator remembers how "the next year started that very day."

The narrator demonstrates that he has learned how to treat women with respect. Previously, the narrator and his friends had objectified Willadean's body, talking about her but not to her. In stealing the seed watermelon, a symbol of femininity, they had again disrespected the feminine. However, with his new maturity, the narrator understands that he must treat Willadean as a person, not an object. The two fathers' laughter at his comment suggest that the community approves of this far more respectful and consensual romantic relationship. Additionally, Mr. Wills's demonstration that his gun was filled with buckshot the whole time shows once again that, despite the gossip, he is a trustworthy man according to the community's morals. With this reassurance, the narrator can commit to building an honest relationship with him.

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