

A Day's Wait



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway grew up in a suburb of Chicago, spending summers with his family in rural Michigan. After high school, he got a job writing for *The Kansas City Star*, but left after only six months to join the Red Cross Ambulance Corps during World War I, where he was injured and awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valor. Afterward, he lived in Ontario and Chicago, where he met his first wife, Hadley Richardson. In 1921 they moved to Paris, where he worked on his writing and also developed a long friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald and other ex-patriate American writers of the Lost Generation. After the 1926 publication of his first novel, [The Sun Also Rises](#), Hemingway divorced Hadley and married Arkansas native Pauline Pfeiffer. The couple moved to Florida, where Hemingway wrote [A Farewell to Arms](#) (1929), which became a bestseller. Hemingway then moved to Spain to serve as a war correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, a job that inspired his famous 1939 novel [For Whom the Bell Tolls](#). After its publication, Hemingway met his third wife, Martha Gellhorn. Hemingway married his fourth and final wife, Mary Hemingway, in 1946, and the couple spent the next fourteen years living in Cuba. In 1953, Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his novel [The Old Man and the Sea](#), and in 1954 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. After a final move to Idaho, Hemingway took his own life in 1961, following in the footsteps of his father who had died by suicide in 1928.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression, which began in 1929, devastated economies worldwide. In the United States, thousands of banks failed, and hundreds of thousands of families became homeless in a worsening spiral that lasted until the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 opened a period of recovery. National unemployment peaked at 25 percent in 1933, the year “A Day’s Wait” was published. In Germany, unemployment reached nearly 30 percent in 1932, and the country’s acute crisis opened the way for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party to rise to power.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Hemingway’s works examine father-son relationships, including the essential Hemingway short story “Indian Camp,” along with numerous other stories featuring his recurring protagonist Nick Adams. Some scholars have speculated that Nick, a child and young man in Hemingway’s earlier story

collections, is now the adult father of Schatz in “A Day’s Wait.” The book that the father reads to his son in the story, *Howard Pyle’s Book of Pirates*, is a real collection of pirate stories and illustrations by Howard Pyle, published in 1921. Pyle wrote and illustrated a number of books for children, most famously *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883). Hemingway’s interest in writing about death and the failure of conventional values like masculine heroism was shared with other members of the Lost Generation, a group of writers who came of age during World War I and were deeply affected by their exposure to the horrors of warfare. After World War I, many such American and British writers formed an expatriate community in Paris and created lasting intellectual and personal bonds. Other notable writers who belonged to the Lost Generation include F. Scott Fitzgerald ([The Great Gatsby](#), [The Beautiful and the Damned](#)) and James Joyce ([A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#), [Ulysses](#)).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “A Day’s Wait”
- **When Written:** March-July 1933
- **Where Written:** Florida and Wyoming
- **When Published:** October 1933
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** An American family home
- **Climax:** The young boy asks his father when he’s going to die.
- **Antagonist:** Miscommunication
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Father and Sons. Hemingway’s three children, all boys, were born between 1923 and 1931. In the winter of 1932, the oldest boy, nine-year-old John, came down with influenza. The episode likely inspired this story, which his father wrote a few months later.

The Nick Adams Canon. Most scholars believe that the unnamed narrator in “A Day’s Wait” is in fact Hemingway’s returning character Nick Adams. In another story featuring Nick and his son, the boy is also called “Schatz.” Hemingway used the same term of endearment for his own sons.



PLOT SUMMARY

The unnamed narrator of this story, the father of a nine-year-

old boy nicknamed Schatz, notices one morning that his son seems ill. He urges the boy to go back to bed, but the boy denies that he's sick until his father feels his forehead and confirms that he has a fever.

The doctor comes to examine the boy. He takes the boy's **temperature** and tells them that the boy has a fever of 102 degrees. Downstairs, the doctor gives medicine to the boy's father and diagnoses the boy with mild influenza, which he says isn't dangerous as long as the fever stays below 104 degrees.

When the doctor leaves, the father reads to his son aloud from a **book about pirates**. He notes that the boy looks very pale and inattentive. Eventually the boy tells his father that he doesn't have to stay in the room with him, "if it bothers you." His father denies this, but the boy only repeats himself, "No, I mean you don't have to stay if it's going to bother you." Reasoning that his son must be feeling a bit lightheaded, the father gives him more medicine and leaves him alone to rest.

The father heads outside with his dog to hunt quail. The landscape is entirely coated with frozen sleet. He kills several birds with difficulty due to the icy conditions, but he is happy to have found a covey of quail so close by and looks forward to hunting more birds in the future.

When he returns home, the father learns that the boy hasn't allowed anyone to come into his room, insisting that no one else must catch his fever. The father goes in, anyway, and takes his temperature again: 102.4 degrees. The boy asks about the temperature, and his father says it's nothing to worry about. The boy admits that he can't help thinking about it. His father gives him the next dose of medicine, and the boy asks if it will do any good. His father assures him that it will, but the boy still seems preoccupied.

Suddenly the boy asks his father what time he's going to die. The father is startled and reassures him that he isn't going to die. The boy replies that he heard the doctor say his temperature was 102 degrees, and he learned from his classmates in France that a fever over 44 degrees is deadly. The father realizes that his son has spent the whole day waiting to die.

He explains to the boy that France and America use different thermometers and units of temperature, just like they use different units of distance—miles and kilometers. The boy simply says "Oh," but his whole body relaxes. The story ends with the father noting how the next day the boy had loosened his "hold over himself" so much that "he cried very easily at things that were of no importance."

than stubbornly ignore the symptoms of illness. His care and concern for his son, whom he lovingly calls "Schatz," meaning "treasure," ultimately backfires. The father and the doctor both fail to share medical information with the boy—the difference between **temperatures** in Fahrenheit and Celsius—and inadvertently causes him great alarm.

Schatz (The Son) – The father's son is a nine-year-old boy nicknamed "Schatz," or treasure. When he falls ill with influenza, he attempts to appear mature, manly, and unemotional. Rather than admit to the weaknesses of illness, confusion, loneliness, or fear, he denies himself rest, company, and sympathy on what he thinks is his deathbed. At his age, he doesn't understand enough about the world to realize that America uses a different **temperature** scale than most other countries; since his French classmates told him that a 44-degree fever is fatal, and he has a whopping 102-degree fever, the boy mistakenly believes that he is dying. When the boy's father assures him that he isn't going to die, the boy quits trying to act so mature allows himself to cry over minor upsets.

The Doctor – The doctor visits the household and measures the son's **temperature** at 102 degrees. He then gives the father medicine for his son and tells him that the boy has influenza, part of a mild epidemic of the flu. The doctor confidently declares that the boy will be fine as long as his temperature stays below 104 degrees and he doesn't contract pneumonia. The doctor explains this diagnosis to the father but not to the boy himself—something that would have prevented the boy from silently fearing his imminent death.



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.



SILENCE AND MISCOMMUNICATION

In "A Day's Wait," a sick nine-year-old boy, called "Schatz" (German for "darling" or "treasure") by his father, confuses Fahrenheit with Celsius and imagines that his **temperature** is fatally high. This false assumption is left uncorrected for an entire day as the boy fearfully waits to die. His father, meanwhile, spends the day enjoying himself outside, utterly unaware of the terror his son is facing. Hemingway's short story is thus a tragedy of miscommunication; the boy wouldn't have endured so many hours of solitary fear had he spoken up to his father, or had his father done more to inquire into his son's state of mind. In this way, Hemingway illustrates how the failure to communicate openly and honestly can result in a knowledge gap, to be filled



CHARACTERS

The Father – The father is the story's unnamed narrator. He treats his nine-year-old son with affection and tenderness, encouraging him to rest and allow his body to recover rather

with painful confusion and misunderstanding.

The sick boy tries to suffer in silence from the very beginning of the story. At first, he refuses to go back to bed or to admit that he's ill, even though his father seems sympathetic and attentive to his discomfort. In fact, the father, who narrates the story, speaks quite tenderly of his son, noting how he initially looks "a very sick and miserable boy of nine years." Nevertheless, even when the boy hears the doctor note that his temperature is 102 degrees and mistakenly thinks that he will die of such a high fever, he still says nothing. Having heard his French classmates say that a fever of 44 degrees (Celsius) was fatal, the boy thus believes his 102-degree fever (Fahrenheit) certainly means death, not knowing that different temperature scales exist. The boy's insistence on keeping to himself allows his macabre imagination to go unchecked, thus suggesting how silence creates an opening for trauma.

Of course, the miscommunication at the heart of the story is hardly the boy's fault; both his father and doctor also fail to communicate clearly and openly with the child in their care. When his father and the doctor leave the room after examining the boy, they discuss his condition in great detail—noting, for instance, that a flu is going around and that it is "nothing to worry about if the fever did not go above one hundred and four degrees." This simple fact would certainly alleviate the boy's fear, but neither adult explains this diagnosis to the boy. When the boy and his father do talk to each other, they don't speak of his condition in any meaningful way. When the boy's father asks him, "How do you feel, Schatz?" he responds merely, "Just the same, so far." He doesn't explain his feelings about being close to death, and though his father can tell that something is wrong, the latter doesn't pry. The father notices that his son seems "very detached" and that he is "looking very strangely," yet when the boy repeatedly urges his father not to stay in the room with him, he doesn't question his son about his odd behavior nor prompt him to confess what's going on. Instead, he tells himself that "perhaps [the boy] was a little lightheaded" and leaves to give him some space. He only imagines physical causes of his son's discomfort and fails to look into signs of emotional turmoil. The adults' silence on the matter of his health reinforces the boy's idea that he, too, must remain silent, and he thus continues to keep his distress to himself.

Indeed, while neither the boy nor his father is trying to hurt the other, miscommunication only breeds distrust in the story. Because the boy began his day by insisting to his father that he was "all right" when he was actually feeling sick, he may suspect his father of lying in the same fashion when his father says, "Your temperature is all right [...] It's nothing to worry about." The boy continues to lie to his father when he claims, "I'm taking it easy," when he clearly isn't. He doesn't believe that the medicine will work, and even when his father assures him that "You aren't going to die [...] People don't die with a fever of one hundred and two," he refuses to believe him until his father

explains exactly how different types of thermometers and temperature scales work. Having spent all day hiding his true feelings, the boy knows how people are capable of dishonesty and fears his father is lying.

It is only when the boy and his father talk openly that the former's fear is overcome. The boy asks when he is going to die, in response to which the father finally pushes his son to elaborate on what he's thinking about. This is how the father learns that, because the boy lacked vital information—that is, because he was making assumptions amidst a sort of silence—the boy had misunderstood the difference between Celsius with Fahrenheit, and that his fever reading on the latter was nothing to be concerned about. The boy's father then tries to explain the measurements by comparing them to miles and kilometers, using clear, explicit communication to assuage the child's fears. Of course, if they had been more willing to discuss both the illness and their feelings from the beginning, there never would have been such a needless misunderstanding. Instead, a prolonged miscommunication born of mutual silence created traumatic consequences.



MASCULINITY AND HEROISM

The book that the father reads to his son in "A Day's Wait" is notably **a book about pirates**—men who embody toughness, bravery, and absolute autonomy; who chase after danger and meet death with pride and refuse to show weakness until the last. The mention of this book suggests that the boy is following the example of famous male heroes when he forces himself to be so stoic in the face of supposed death. Indeed, the boy's behavior reflects the fatalistic heroism that is on display in much of Hemingway's work. Here, Hemingway specifically positions ideal masculinity as a combination of courage and composure in the face of death. Though the boy's unnecessary trauma, however, the story also exposes the potential harm of such strict (and in today's world, decidedly outdated) standards of masculinity. The ideals of toughness and self-assurance in fact lead the boy to engage in damaging emotional restraint.

Before the boy even hears the **temperature** that causes him to think he is dying, he tries to bear his painful symptoms with staunch stoicism, refusing to go back to bed despite his pounding head, chills, and bodily aches. However, pushing himself to dress and go downstairs like normal does nothing but aggravate his poor condition. As his father observes, "[W]hen I came downstairs he was dressed, sitting by the fire, looking a very sick and miserable boy of nine years." The boy lingers in a state of acute torment for the rest of the day, as Hemingway illustrates in his tortured stare: "His face was very white and there were dark areas under his eyes. He lay still in the bed and seemed very detached from what was going on"; "[H]e was looking at the foot of the bed, looking very strangely"; "I [...] found him in exactly the position I had left him, white-

faced, but with the tops of his cheeks-flushed by the fever, staring still, as he had stared, at the foot of the bed." The terrible toll of his long day spent silently awaiting his death sentence is also illustrated in his unusual behavior the day after, when "he cried very easily at little things that were of no importance." He could be crying excessively because the normal effort to master his emotions feels too painfully reminiscent of the previous day's ordeal, or because he is still struggling to process the overwhelming grim fear that haunted him for so many hours. Either way, he is clearly suffering from the aftereffects of his silent, drawn-out martyrdom.

Ironically, in many respects the boy's father actually presents a contrast to Hemingway's typically emotionally reserved male characters. When the young boy falls ill, readers can see immediately how he enjoys a loving and protective relationship with his father. The father tells his son that he should go back to bed three times, suggesting he would hardly think less of the young boy for his bout of weakness or dismiss his condition as nothing serious. That he lovingly calls his son "Schatz," or darling, further reveals his willingness to be openly warm and affectionate. Nevertheless, the father still exhibits several stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as following a heavily paternalistic attitude towards his son that leads him to exclude the boy from a key conference with the doctor. While his choice to shelter his son is well-intentioned, it is also patronizing. The idea that women and children should be sheltered from potential danger or distress, leaving men to bear the burden alone, promotes the false assumption that only men can maintain their wits and composure and respond with bravery and rationality. Furthermore, the father spends his day hunting quail while his son is sick, effectively killing as his son thinks he's dying. This again connects masculinity with death, and specifically with control or bravery in its face. Hunting is also a typically masculine pursuit associated with men providing for their families; yet by going out to shoot quail, the father has basically abandoned his son when the boy needed him most. This again points to a sort of paradox or folly inherent to hypermasculine heroism.

Learning from his father's example, the boy in turn tries to shelter his family by keeping them away from his bedside, where they might catch his fatal illness while caring for him or experience terrible grief while watching him die. Yet the boy's pursuit of a fatalistic and selfless death does nothing but leave him terrified and isolated as he both denies himself the comfort of his family's presence at his "deathbed" and prolongs his tragic delusion. Unfortunately, in trying to emulate a heroic martyr's stoic embrace of death, the boy makes his father's mistake of assuming that he knows what's best for everyone else. His father believed that what was best for the boy was not hearing about his illness; now, the boy believes that what is best for his family is not seeing him suffer. When they withhold information to spare people pain, the father and son not only

engage in an unnecessary martyrdom, but also directly limit the free will of those people who deserve to make their own choices. As the story illustrates, such overprotectiveness is too often a paternalistic mistake that men feel entitled to make when they feel heroically duty-bound to exercise their "superior" nerve and brains.

Even as Hemingway's story present a certain ideal of masculinity, it also implicitly links this "heroism" to a distinct sense of miscommunication and suffering. As such, the story is as much a condemnation as it is an appreciation of traditional fatalistic heroism, the insistence on which does little to actually spare another from pain.



MATURITY AND INNOCENCE

In "A Day's Wait," the nine-year-old Schatz clearly attempts to emulate the adults around him. He approaches his impending "death" with a brave face that not only reflects the story's conception of ideal masculinity, but further points to the child's equation of growing up with a sense of stoic acceptance and lack of emotionality. His father, meanwhile, reveals a glaring ignorance of his son's maturation, often treating the boy like a much younger child than he is. The father's blind paternalism heightens the boy's internal suffering by leaving him in the dark to fear the worst, and failing to recognize and soothe the boy's fears when they appear in a more muted manner than a young child's openly emotional demeanor. Hemingway's story ultimately reveals the broader parental urge to deny their kids autonomy and fail to recognize when they're growing up.

Throughout the story, the father ignores his son's efforts to exhibit maturity and acts as if the boy is younger than he is, effectively denying that he is growing up. The boy doesn't want to be coddled, claiming that he is "all right" and does not need to go back to bed like his father tells him to. When his father offers to read to him so he won't be bored, the boy doesn't admit that he would like to be read aloud to, only saying, "If you want to." He won't indulge any desire for company or comfort, instead telling his father to leave him if "it"—that is, watching him "die"—"bothers" him. Later, the boy refuses to let anyone else into the room, insisting, "You can't come in [...] You mustn't get what I have." The boy's belief that maturity means hiding all weakness and pretending to know everything may be misguided, but his father has not helped him to figure out a true path to maturity, preferring instead to act as if his son is still a simple child. Furthermore, that his father affectionately calls his son "Schatz," a German term of endearment that means "darling" or "sweetheart," reflects love and affection yet is also somewhat infantilizing—further suggesting that the father fails to see his child as a maturing young man. When the boy says, "I don't worry...but I can't help from thinking," his father responds, "Don't think...Just take it easy." Telling someone "Don't think" is rarely good advice, and here it suggests how the father believes

he can still control how his son perceives the world. He imagines that his son respects his judgment unquestionably rather than holding distinct, informed opinions.

The father's ignorance of his son's maturing consciousness leads him to exclude the boy from his discussion with the doctor, thinking it unnecessary to involve his "Schatz" because the boy would just follow his father's lead and not become alarmed. Because he does not think of his son as intellectually complex, he is unable to recognize the boy's internal distress after the doctor's visit, perceiving his mental agitation ("He [...] seemed very detached from what was going on," "[H]e was not following what I was reading," "[H]e was looking at the foot of the bed, looking very strangely") as physical affliction: "I thought perhaps he was a little lightheaded." The father can effectively read the boy's bodily symptoms, despite his protests to the contrary—"I saw he looked ill. He was shivering, his face was white, and he walked slowly as though it ached to move [...]" "You better go back to bed. 'No. I'm all right.' 'You go to bed.'"—but he cannot perceive his son's separate thoughts.

However, his son is certain that he has legitimate knowledge of his own. He refuses to simply accept his father's vague assurances that "Your **temperature** is all right [...]" "It's nothing to worry about," and "Of course" the medicine "will do [...]" good. His father could have explained to him exactly what the doctor had said—that "One [pill] was to bring down the fever, another a purgative, the third to overcome an acid condition. The germs of influenza can only exist in an acid condition, he explained. He seemed to know all about influenza and said there was nothing to worry about if the fever did not go above one hundred and four degrees"—but he does not think such a detailed answer is necessary to reassure his son when his word alone should be enough. Even when the father finally addresses his son's specific fear—"You aren't going to die [...]" "People don't die with a fever of one hundred and two"—the boy retorts, to his father's surprise, "I know they do. At school in France the boys told me you can't live with forty-four degrees." The boy no longer trusts his father's assurances after his father wouldn't tell him the medical truth to begin with, and requires thoroughly factual evidence to convince him.

The next day, the boy becomes more childlike, crying "very easily at little things that were of no importance." This change in demeanor from how he carried himself at the beginning of the story suggests how he had freely expressed his feelings in the past. As a young child, his emotions were much closer to the surface and more transparent. As he has aged, he has developed control over he expresses his emotions, but his father underestimates this self-restraint and still expects the boy's feelings to surface. When the boy exhibits no familiar signs of distress, his father wrongly assumes he is unconcerned. The dramatic revelation of his son's developing consciousness and strengthening willpower will hopefully lead the father to overcome his resistance to the boy's maturation, because

otherwise the boy is dependent on other, less suitable figures to guide him. When his father won't talk to him about death and adulthood, he gets his ideas from unrealistic popular narratives (The **Book of Pirates**, for example) or other flawed sources. When "A Day's Wait" was first published in 1933, Hemingway's own son would have been ten years old, barely older than "Schatz." An older child's inevitable maturation and its accompanying pitfalls would clearly have been on the author's mind as he witnessed his own son at that age, and in this story he rebukes the parent's reluctance to accept his child's evolution into a more independent and equally complex being.



SYMBOLS

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



BOOK OF PIRATES

The book that the father reads to his son, *Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates*, symbolizes the hypermasculine conventions that boys learn to emulate from a young age. Pirates are rough, uncivilized figures who embody toughness, bravery, and independence; they chase after danger, meet death with pride, and refuse to show weakness. No solicitous doctors pay visits to their ships; nobody indulges them with a day abed. However, it is telling that this way of life, these fearless and solitary outlaws of the seas, had become almost wholly obsolete by the time that Pyle's romanticized tales and Hemingway's story were published. Hemingway exposes the harm of outdated standards of masculinity like toughness and self-assurance when these ideals lead the boy to practice damaging emotional restraint and fatalistic martyrdom, and his father to practice blind and harmful paternalism.



TEMPERATURE

In "A Day's Wait," the boy's confusion over a principle as seemingly straightforward as temperature represents the endless possibilities of individual interpretation, and how that paves the way for profound miscommunication. When the boy falls ill and his father calls for the doctor, what should be a plain and objective scientific fact instead becomes a matter of perfect ambiguity. The boy's confusion of a measurement given in Fahrenheit for the same number in Celsius exemplifies just how differently someone can understand the same reality, and underscores the need for clear and open communication—he thinks he's dying with a 102-degree fever because his classmates in France told him that a 44-degree fever is fatal. As this scenario illustrates, even basic facts people assume to be in absolute agreement about

can carry vastly different meanings in different contexts. Reaching a common understanding requires dialogue and transparency, not silence and pretense.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

“A Day’s Wait” Quotes

☞ But when I came downstairs he was dressed, sitting by the fire, looking a very sick and miserable boy of nine years. When I put my hand on his forehead I knew he had a fever.

“You go up to bed,” I said, “You’re sick.”

“I’m all right,” he said.

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

The father has already told his son twice that he should just stay in bed if he isn’t well, but the boy stubbornly proceeds to get dressed and go downstairs, only making himself feel worse. By recognizing the boy’s pain and urging him to rest rather than disregard his symptoms, the father shows himself to be an attentive, loving father who cares for his son’s wellbeing. The boy’s reluctance to acknowledge his obvious sickness—refusing to return to bed and insisting “I’m all right” even though he’s clearly not—is somewhat puzzling, given his father’s sympathetic attitude that suggests getting sick is nothing to be ashamed of. As the story unfolds, it’s clear that the boy is attempting to appear masculine and mature. However, this emotional restraint turns out to be incredibly damaging, as it prevents the boy from voicing his deep-rooted anxiety about what he believes is his fast approaching death.

☞ After a while he said to me, “You don’t have to stay in here with me, Papa, if it bothers you.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“No, I mean you don’t have to stay if it’s going to bother you.”

I thought perhaps he was a little lightheaded and after giving him the prescribed capsules at eleven o’clock I went out for a while.

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

After the doctor visits and tells the father that the boy is indeed sick with the flu, the father stays by his son’s bedside to administer his hourly medicine as well as cheer him with stories. The father indicates no impatience or desire to be elsewhere, which makes the boy’s insistence on releasing him from his post surprising. The father’s presence doesn’t seem to “bother” his son, either, so it’s not clear why the boy would urge him to go. As the story progresses, however, it’s clear that the boy is attempting to shield his father—and the rest of his family—from witnessing what he believes to be his rapidly approaching death. It seems that the boy picked up this protective, masculine behavior from his father; just as the father shelters the boy from having to listen to the doctor’s diagnosis and instructions about administering medication, so too does the boy shelter his family from having to shoulder the emotional burden of his “deadly” fever.

Instead of questioning the boy’s puzzling behavior, the father merely decides that his son is woozy from the fever and takes his cue to leave so the boy can rest in peace. This is one of the many miscommunications in the story, as the father misreads the boy’s carefully concealed emotional turmoil surrounding his illness and impending death as mere physical symptoms of the flu.

☞ At the house they said the boy had refused to let any one come into the room.

“You can’t come in,” he said. “You mustn’t get what I have.”

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the father arrives back at the house after hunting to hear that his son has prevented everyone in the family from entering his room. The boy's self-imposed quarantine seems somewhat extreme for his minor condition, especially at his young age when he should be used to people caring for him when he's sick rather than bearing the illness alone. His supposedly melodramatic behavior foreshadows the climactic revelation that he believes his 102-degree fever is fatal. Once again, the boy attempts to appear brave in the face of death and protect his family from such a heavy emotional burden. Of course, he does this under the guise of not wanting them to catch "what I have"—a logical concern—which means that his family still doesn't realize the deep emotional turmoil the boy is going through. The boy's concern that his family will catch "what I have" may also mean that he's worried they will "catch" his feelings of dread, pain, and anxiety about his death.

☞ "Your temperature is all right," I said. "It's nothing to worry about."

"I don't worry," he said, "but I can't keep from thinking."

"Don't think," I said. "Just take it easy."

"I'm taking it easy," he said and looked straight ahead. He was evidently holding tight onto himself about something.

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

Without a clue of what the boy actually believes about his fever, the father nonetheless reassures his son that his temperature is nothing serious. In this passage, the boy declares paradoxically that he doesn't "worry," but he can't stop "thinking." Unwilling to appear cowardly in front of his father, the boy won't admit to feeling fear or dread, only that the temperature is on his mind. Being told "don't think" makes for fairly poor advice, and it's clear that the father doesn't understand the gravity of the boy's worries. He advises his son to relax, and the boy says he is relaxed, but

his body language reveals his persistent anxiety. Their communication is anything but clear and precise: the boy won't disclose his acute unease, and the father doesn't know how to talk him through his anxiety and instead just tells him to tune it out.

☞ I sat down and opened the Pirate book and commenced to read, but I could see he was not following, so I stopped.

"About what time do you think I'm going to die?" he asked.

"What?"

"About how long will it be before I die?"

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the father continues reading aloud to his son from a book of stories about infamous pirates. While the boy is preoccupied with his inner turmoil and not actively listening to the stories at the moment, the book's appearance in these scenes suggests that the tales of heroism and stereotypical masculinity are, in fact, associated with his present behavior. When the boy unexpectedly asks his father when he's going to die, readers realize that the book likely played a role in the boy's stoicism; it seems that he wants to confront death bravely and heroically, just like the pirates in the book. Instead of seeking comfort or openly revealing his emotional pain and crippling fear, the boy merely asks what time he can expect to die, painting himself as a martyr.

☞ "People don't die with a fever of one hundred and two. That's a silly way to talk."

"I know they do. At school in France the boys told me you can't live with forty-four degrees. I've got a hundred and two."

He had been waiting to die all day, ever since nine o'clock in the morning.

"Poor old Schatz. It's like miles and kilometers. You aren't going to die. That's a different thermometer. On that thermometer thirty-seven is normal. On this kind it's ninety-eight."

Related Characters: The Father, Schatz (The Son) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

When the boy finally discloses the reason he thinks he's dying, his father realizes just how firmly the boy believed in his certain fate, rather than simply doubting his father's word that nothing could possibly happen. The boy wasn't just worried that he *might* die, wisely understanding that his father is imperfect and couldn't guarantee a sure recovery, but he was fatalistically resigned to his inevitable death.

Facts based on scientific measurements and fixed outcomes create absolute certainty, and it's indeed true that a fever over forty-four degrees *Celsius* would always be fatal.

However, this episode illustrates the importance of communication and humbly verifying your understanding with another authority, rather than presuming to grasp the whole picture at first glance. If the boy had asked his father or the doctor about his prognosis, or if the father had asked his son about his acute unease, they could have resolved this misunderstanding from the very beginning.

“His gaze at the foot of the bed relaxed slowly. The hold over himself relaxed too, finally, and the next day it was very slack and he cried very easily at little things that were of no importance.”

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), Schatz (The Son)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the story, the father observes how his son becomes less tense after realizing that he isn't actually going to die. Relaxing emotionally as well as physically, the boy unleashes his feelings freely. On the day of the fever, he sought to conduct himself at the height of stoic maturity; he now returns to a childish disinhibition, grappling openly with his wayward emotions. The previous day's ordeal severely taxed his self-control, and he will perhaps need time to reestablish his prior composure. It is likely, however, that like a muscle that twinges the day after an exhausting workout, his weakened discipline will ultimately return stronger than before. Youthful mistakes are inevitable, and as he grows from his experiences, he will hopefully develop the wisdom and humility to freely ask for help and clarification.



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.

“A DAY’S WAIT”

The unnamed narrator, the father of a nine-year-old boy nicknamed “Schatz,” notices one morning that his son is shivering, pale, and in pain. He asks the boy what’s wrong, and his son responds that he has a headache. The father twice tells him to go back to bed, but the boy refuses, instead getting dressed and going downstairs. When the father comes down and sees his son sitting by the fire, looking ill, he feels the boy’s forehead. He can immediately tell that the boy has a fever, and he sends him up to bed. The boy obeys his father, but he still insists that he’s fine.

The doctor comes to examine the boy. He takes the boy’s **temperature** and says that he has a fever of 102 degrees. Downstairs, the doctor leaves medicine with the father and diagnoses the boy with mild influenza. The doctor says that isn’t dangerous as long as the boy’s fever stays below 104 degrees and doesn’t turn into pneumonia.

Back upstairs, the father offers to read aloud to his son from a book called Howard Pyle’s **Book of Pirates**. He notes that the boy’s “face was very white,” and that he “seemed very detached from what was going on.” The boy can’t follow what his father is reading, but he won’t go back to sleep, either. Eventually he tells his father that he doesn’t have to stay in the room “if it bothers you.” His father denies this, but the boy only repeats himself, “No, I mean you don’t have to stay if it’s going to bother you.” Reasoning that his son must be feeling a bit lightheaded, the father gives him more medicine and leaves him alone to rest.

The boy is clearly sick, but he is determined not to be incapacitated by his illness. He wants to dress and go downstairs like his father, not lie meekly in bed and be coddled—perhaps an effort to seem more mature. In vain, the loving and protective father wants his son to stay safely tucked away in his bed.



The doctor examines the boy and announces his temperature, but he exits the room without explaining his diagnosis to the boy—a significant lack of communication that catalyzes the boy’s anxiety. Downstairs, the doctor and the father discuss the condition and recommended treatment in the patient’s absence, not thinking it necessary to include him in adult matters.



The book that the father chooses to read to his son, Howard Pyle’s Book of Pirates, chronicles the adventures of infamous pirates. Pirates promote ideal masculinity as fearlessness and toughness, not humility or thoughtfulness. This model of manhood and heroism prompts the boy to conceal his fear of dying and suffer in silence rather than accept comfort or seek clarification about his illness. The boy’s belief that he needs to prove himself a man by shouldering a painful burden alone is incredibly isolating. Meanwhile, his father, who has protected the boy from potentially hearing any bad news from the doctor, is now unable to understand why his son would be distressed—the beginnings of a profound miscommunication.



The father heads outside with his dog to hunt quail. The landscape is coated with frozen sleet, and he falls twice while crossing a frozen creek. He targets a covey of quail and kills two before they scatter. Due to the icy conditions, he misses five more but manages to hit another two. Rather than being disappointed, he feels happy to have found a covey so close to home and to have so many birds left to hunt in the future.

When the father returns to the house, he hears that the boy hasn't allowed anyone to come into his room, insisting that no one else must catch his fever. The father goes in anyway and sees the boy looking just as he had left him: pale, feverish, and stubbornly awake. The father takes his son's **temperature** again, and the boy asks what it says. It's 102.4, but the father says it's only about 100 degrees. The boy responds that the doctor said it was 102, and his father tells him the temperature is nothing to worry about. The boy admits that he can't help thinking about it, and his father tells him to stop thinking and "take it easy." The boy says that he is, but his father observes that "he was evidently holding tight to himself about something."

The father gives the boy the next dose of medicine, and the boy asks if it will do any good. "Of course it will," his father says, and starts to read aloud again until he realizes the boy still isn't following along. The boy then asks what time he's going to die, and his father reassures him that he isn't going to die. The boy replies that he heard the doctor say his **temperature** was 102 degrees. His father assures him that people don't die of 102-degree fevers, but the boy insists that he learned from his classmates in France that a fever over 44 degrees is fatal. The father realizes that his poor son has spent the whole day waiting to die.

The father explains to the boy—"poor old Schatz"—that the two countries use different thermometers and measurements of **temperature**, just like they use different measurements of distance—miles versus kilometers. He explains, "On that thermometer thirty-seven is normal. On this kind it's ninety-eight." The boy asks if the father is certain and then merely says, "Oh," but he visibly relaxes. The next day, the boy had loosened his "hold over himself" so considerably that "he cried very easily at things that were of no importance."

The father cannot help his son recover from the flu any faster, so he turns to hunting to pass the time while the fever runs its course—an ironic choice, as he occupies himself with killing while his son believes he is dying. Hunting is another conventionally male pursuit, and it fulfills the purpose of providing for his family. The father's apparent satisfaction in upholding his masculine, fatherly role illustrates his ingrained paternalism that blinds him to his son's growing maturity.



Since the boy thinks he's dying, his self-imposed isolation is an attempt to protect his family from his supposedly fatal fever and tragic death, imitating the protective and masculine behaviors that his father models. Nonetheless, by denying his family the chance to stay with him during his "last moments," the boy disregards their will. His father continues to show the same disregard for the boy's right to the truth as he downplays the fever and fails to explain the diagnosis.



Here, the father finally understands the boy's strange expression and behavior, and the gravity of the father and son's miscommunication becomes clear. In trying to comfort the boy and downplay his illness, the father only exacerbated the boy's anxiety. The boy's confusion about different temperature scales shows how even the most objective facts, like measurable body temperature, can be misinterpreted with terrible consequences in the absence of clear communication and trust.



The two different systems of measurement for the same phenomenon—like Fahrenheit and Celsius for temperature or miles and kilometers for distance—illustrate the radically different ways in which two people can interpret the same situation. It is significant that the boy cried over "things that were of no importance" the following day. This behavior, which contrasts sharply with his self-imposed isolation and stoicism, suggests that he's let go of his attempts to appear mature and masculine like his father and can instead relax into being a child again.





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