

The Scarlet Ibis



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES HURST

James Hurst grew up on a coastal farm in North Carolina. He attended the Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta, Georgia, before studying chemical engineering at North Carolina State College. He then served in the United States Army during World War II. After the war, he studied singing and acting at the Julliard School of Music in New York, and afterwards continued to study opera in Italy. After three years, he returned to New York to begin what would be a 34-year career as a banker. While working at Chase Manhattan Bank, he wrote short stories and a play in his spare time. Although several of his stories were published in smaller literary magazines, none received nearly as much recognition as *The Scarlet Ibis*, which won the Atlantic First award in 1960, the year it was published. It has since become a staple of short story anthologies. Hurst died in North Carolina at the age of 91.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James Hurst drew upon his own experience when writing *The Scarlet Ibis*, as he grew up in rural North Carolina, where the story is set. Hurst was born in 1922, which makes him only slightly younger than the boys in the story. The story takes place during World War I, a decision which was likely influenced by Hurst's experiences with war during World War II. However, the war is only mentioned in passing in the story, highlighting the boys' innocence and the ways in which they're shielded from the larger issues of the time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Scarlet Ibis" bears some similarities to the work of other midcentury American writers, such as Denton Welch. Welch's *When I was Thirteen* is another short story that centers on the dynamic and conflict between two brothers. It focuses on the coming-of-age of the younger brother, and the pressures and expectations his brother places upon him. Another midcentury work that has connections to this text is Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. In that play, one of the main characters, Laura, also has a disability and is similarly pushed beyond her limitations by her overbearing mother, Amanda. However, Amanda's efforts (like Brother's) are selfishly motivated, resulting in the shattering of Laura's confidence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Scarlet Ibis*

- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Late American modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, coming-of-age story
- **Setting:** A family home in eastern North Carolina during World War I
- **Climax:** Disappointed by Doodle's physical limitations, Brother leaves him alone in the forest as a storm rages, only to discover later that Doodle has died.
- **Antagonist:** Brother
- **Point of View:** First person limited (Brother is the narrator)

EXTRA CREDIT

The Importance of Place. James Hurst himself has commented that there are three characters in the work—Doodle, Brother, and the setting—thus highlighting the importance of the natural world as an influence in the events of the story.

The Art of Adaptation. *The Scarlet Ibis* was adapted into an opera in 2015 in which the character of Doodle, because of his physical difference, was represented by a puppet.



PLOT SUMMARY

In rural North Carolina, the unnamed narrator (who is referred to as "Brother") describes the season in which **the scarlet ibis** landed in the tree in his family's front yard, when summer was finished but autumn had not yet begun. He remarks that he's surprised the memory is so clear to him, as is his memory of his brother, Doodle.

Brother flashes back to when Doodle was born. Brother is six at the time and is immediately disappointed by Doodle. Doodle is born with a large head and tiny body, and his doctor doesn't expect him to live more than a few days, though Brother's Aunt Nicey believes that he will. Doodle's parents have a small **coffin** built for him, but he survives infancy and they decide to name him William Armstrong.

Brother confesses how he had wanted a brother with whom he could run and play, but his parents tell him that Doodle would never be able to do those things. When he is two years old, Doodle starts to crawl, at which point Brother decides to call him Doodle, because he crawls backwards like a doodlebug.

Doodle's father builds him a **go-cart** so that Brother can take him out to play. Even though Doodle has many restrictions on what he can do, Brother essentially ignores them. Brother takes Doodle to Old Woman Swamp, where they enjoy each

other's company, but Brother is also sometimes mean to Doodle. Brother brings Doodle up to the barn loft to show him the coffin his parents had made for him, and won't let him leave until he touches it. Doodle does so, screams in terror, and as Brother carries him down the ladder Doodle begs his brother not to leave him.

When Doodle is five years old, Brother decides to teach Doodle how to walk because he is ashamed of having a brother of that age who cannot. Although Doodle initially doesn't understand why he needs to learn, Brother attempts to teach him every day that summer. Doodle repeatedly falls to the ground, unable to stand, but after much perseverance, Doodle learns to walk. They decide to show their parents and Aunt Nicey, who are overjoyed.

Brother, now believing that he can teach Doodle to do anything, sets out to begin a development program for Doodle, teaching him to run, swim, climb trees, and fight. They work through the spring and summer, and Doodle makes some progress, but Brother worries that he still will not be able to keep up with the other boys in school. After a particularly strenuous day, Doodle collapses and begins to cry.

A few days before school begins, the family notices a scarlet ibis in a tree in their yard. Their bird book reveals that the ibis is not native to the area and must have been carried there by a **storm**. Suddenly, the ibis tries to fly, but its wings are uncoordinated and it crashes to the ground, dying. Doodle is very moved by the death of the ibis and solemnly buries it.

After burying the ibis, the two boys go outside to practice swimming, but Doodle is too tired to swim, so Brother makes him practice rowing instead. Soon, a storm seems to be approaching, and Doodle is too tired to carry on so the boys start to return to their house. It begins to rain heavily, at which point Brother, frustrated with Doodle's failure, starts to run as fast as he can away from Doodle, who cannot keep up. After a while Brother stops and waits for Doodle, but Doodle does not appear. Brother turns back, only to find Doodle limp on the ground and bleeding from the mouth. The story ends with the image of Brother shielding Doodle's dead body from the rain like his own "fallen scarlet ibis."

also has a mean streak towards his younger brother, initially trying to discourage him from coming outside with him by turning over his **go-cart**, and by forcing him to touch the **coffin** that his parents had built for him when he was born. When Brother realizes how much he comes to care for Doodle, he devises a "development program" for him so that he won't be ashamed of Doodle. Brother plans to teach him to run, swim, and climb like other boys so that he can fit in at school. Although this initially pleases his family when Doodle learns to walk, Brother's fierce determination to push Doodle beyond his physical limitations ultimately leads to Doodle's death when Brother abandons him in a **storm** out of hurt pride over Doodle's failure to make progress.

Doodle – The younger brother of the narrator, whom Doodle simply calls Brother. Doodle's real name is William Armstrong, and he is born with a physical disability, having a very large head and a tiny, "shriveled" body. Initially Doodle's doctor does not believe that he is going to live, but Doodle ultimately defies everybody's expectations by learning to crawl and eventually walk. Brother gives Doodle his nickname when he initially learns to crawl, because he is only able to do go backwards like a doodlebug. Brother remarks that it's the kindest thing he might have done for Doodle, because nobody expects anything from someone with a name like that. Doodle enjoys spending time with his brother and idolizes him, so he works hard to try to overcome his physical limitations, though it seems that he would have been just as comfortable progressing on his own terms and timeline. Although he has some success following the "development program" devised for him by his brother, he eventually proves unable to keep up with his brother's expectations. At the end of the story, Doodle dies alone in the forest as he strains to catch up with his brother, who has run ahead of him in a **storm**. In this way, Doodle's brother and his callousness are partly responsible for Doodle's death, but so is the storm, which echoes the storm that caused the death of the **scarlet ibis** earlier in the story. Thus, Doodle and the scarlet ibis become synonymous in the narrator's eyes, as both strange and innocent lives were crushed, tragically, too soon.

Doodle's parents – Also referred to as Mama and Daddy, Doodle and Brother's parents care for their sons and work to make Doodle feel loved, but they also seem disappointed that Doodle will not be able to have the experiences of a normal boy. Like Doodle's doctor, they initially expect Doodle's life to be very short, and have a **coffin** built for their son. Doodle's mother cries when she explains to Brother that Doodle will not be able to participate in many of the same activities that other boys engage in, but later Doodle's father builds a **go-cart** for Doodle so that he can go outside with his brother. Doodle's parents become very excited when Doodle begins to walk, highlighting their desire for him to live a more normal life. Although they only want the best for their son, their desire for him to be more like his brother only adds to the pressure that



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Brother – The narrator of "The Scarlet Ibis," Brother remains nameless throughout the story and is only referred to as "Brother" by his younger brother Doodle. He narrates the story years after the events he describes took place, reflecting on Doodle's short life and premature death. He is six years older than Doodle and is initially disappointed to have a brother with a disability because he wanted a companion with whom he could play. Although he comes to love and accept Doodle, he

causes Doodle to push himself so hard, and eventually leads to his death.

Doodle's doctor – A person who also remains nameless, the doctor serves as a representation of the expectations and limitations that society places on people with disabilities. For instance, the doctor insists that Doodle will not live beyond infancy, that he won't walk, and that he shouldn't get too excited, too hot or cold, or play too roughly. Although Doodle proves that some of the doctor's restrictions were unreasonable or too strict, Brother ignores the doctor's restrictions completely, causing Doodle's death and demonstrating that many of the doctor's concerns and prohibitions were, in fact, justified.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Nicey – Doodle's and Brother's Aunt. She keeps with the pattern that Hurst has set out with the symbolic and representational names he gives his characters. She is religious, and more hopeful that Doodle will live than his doctor is. She shares in the parents' excitement when Doodle begins to walk.



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.



EXPECTATIONS AND DISAPPOINTMENT

The primary conflict of "The Scarlet Ibis" surrounds Doodle's disability and how he works to overcome it with the help of Brother. The way in which Hurst presents Doodle's journey, however, demonstrates that Doodle's biggest challenges often arise not from his actual disability, but instead from the judgment and pressure he experiences from different people in his life. Brother admits that when Doodle was born, he saw him as a "disappointment" because he was born with physical disabilities that would make him unable to play with Brother or participate in activities such as racing, boxing, and climbing trees. This disappointment is only amplified when Doodle reaches school age, as Brother worries that Doodle won't be able to physically keep up with his peers, facing Doodle with yet another societal pressure to fit in. Brother crafts a development program to teach Doodle to run, swim, climb trees, and fight. Although Doodle goes along with this program, Brother's disappointment in Doodle ultimately leads to Doodle's death at the end of the story, demonstrating the ways in which people are often gravely hurt by the unrealistic expectations of those around them.

Doodle's brother is not the only person who has expectations

for him. While Brother pushes Doodle to be more and more active, Doodle's doctor seems resigned to restrict his activity. When Doodle is born, his doctor doesn't think he will live past three days, but Doodle defies these expectations. Even as his life expectancy continues to be short, he surprises his doctor and parents when he starts to crawl and eventually walk, demonstrating that others' expectations do not necessarily constrain him. Doodle's parents work to make him feel loved as he is, but they also experience disappointment that Doodle cannot always share in the experiences of a normal boy. They ask Brother to include Doodle when he goes outside to play, and Doodle's father builds him a **go-cart** to allow him to go outside and spend time with Brother. Early in the story, however, Doodle's mother cries when she explains to Brother that Doodle likely would not be able to join him in his outdoor activities. In addition, Brother describes that Doodle only becomes one of the family when he is able to crawl and sit by the fire, demonstrating that only by overcoming his disability is the family able to accept him.

Readers get few insights into Doodle's own thoughts on his disability. He seems content at first to live within the structure that his doctor has set out for him. Brother describes how a "list of don'ts" went with Doodle, and how he couldn't be too hot, too cold, too tired, couldn't be exposed to the sun, and couldn't be played with too roughly. Doodle is comfortable inside his go-cart, so he doesn't understand, at first, why his brother wants to teach him how to walk. However, he gives in to his brother's demands, and after seeing his parents' and Aunt's delight when he begins to walk, Doodle continues to work harder and harder. After a few weeks, however, Doodle's initial excitement of success wears off when he is unable to keep up with his brother and collapses after a particularly strenuous swimming and rowing lesson. However, his worst fear is not that he will be unable to keep up with other boys—it is that he will disappoint and be abandoned by his brother. Doodle experiences pressure on many sides, whether it's his brother's desire for him to overcome his disability, the subtle cues from his parents, or the restrictions of his doctor. Hurst makes it clear that these pressures constitute a far more complex and heartbreaking struggle than Doodle's disability itself.



PRIDE

Brother takes pride in Doodle's achievements, and this sense of pride becomes a major motivation for his actions throughout "The Scarlet Ibis." He gradually acknowledges that he only helps his brother out of a sense of pride, and that this pride leads him to behave selfishly. Other characters, such as Doodle's parents, also find pride in Doodle's accomplishments and hard work, spurring Doodle to work harder and harder to please his family. Hurst's story points to both positive and negative effects that pride can have on people, but ultimately suggests that Doodle's death was

caused by the pride of those around him.

Brother sees Doodle as a reflection of himself, and therefore works hard to mitigate the sense of shame he feels about having a disabled brother. When Doodle is very young, Brother discovers that Doodle can smile and is aware of the people around him, and Brother feels relieved that he doesn't have to live with a brother who isn't "all there," which he thinks would be "unbearable." Thus, when he teaches Doodle to walk, he does so not out of a desire to improve Doodle's life, but rather out of a desire to have a brother who is not different. Brother's sense of pride is what initially motivates him to push Doodle to grow beyond the limitations of his disability—and, at least initially, this growth seems like a positive outcome associated with pride.

Doodle's parents exhibit a different kind of pride from Brother. As Doodle makes progress, they express genuine pride in his accomplishments. Although they mean well, this expression of pride causes Doodle to push himself in unhealthy ways to win the love and approval of his family. The most joyful moment in the story occurs when Doodle and his brother show off that Doodle can walk, and his parents and Aunt are ecstatic that he has exceeded their expectations for him. However, this causes Brother to believe that he is "infallible," and to push harder and harder on Doodle. Doodle follows along because he idolizes his brother and wants to continue to make his parents happy. Thus, his parent's expression of pride in their son actually has a negative impact on him, as Hurst suggests that perhaps the catastrophe of Doodle's death could have been avoided if they had simply been proud of their son for who he was rather than reinforcing the idea that they wanted him to be different.

Although Doodle's thoughts go unspoken, he continues to work to make his brother proud, and Doodle's brother in turn pushes him harder and harder. Brother describes many episodes in which Doodle collapses out of exhaustion. In the story's final moments, after Doodle has disappointed his Brother in their swimming and rowing lesson, they wordlessly turn back to the house and Doodle continues to look at his brother, "watching for a sign of mercy." However, instead of showing his brother compassion, Brother simply wonders, "what are the words that can solder cracked pride," and races ahead of Doodle in the approaching storm, inadvertently dooming Doodle to death as he does so. Thus, it is not Doodle's disability which ultimately causes his death, but rather the fact that Brother, in his pride, could not accept Doodle's failure to be a normal boy. In this way, what began as the family's innocent desire to help Doodle lead a more fulfilling life becomes poisoned by Brother's pride and self-interest when he pushes Doodle past his limits. With this story, Hurst shows that even though pride can sometimes be positive, when it is borne out of selfishness it is a force of destruction.



DEATH

Hurst refers to death explicitly and implicitly throughout "The Scarlet Ibis," using foreshadowing, the symbolism of the **ibis** itself, and allusions to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. These devices give the story an allegorical dimension, demonstrating that often the most innocent people die not because they deserve to die, but because of the carelessness and wrongdoing of others. The story contains several examples of foreshadowing of Doodle's untimely death. For instance, when Doodle is born, Doodle's parents assume that he will not live and have a small **coffin** built for him, which continues to haunt Doodle as a "memento mori" long after he has outgrown it. Similarly, Brother menacingly remarks that Doodle's real name (William Armstrong) only sounds good on a tombstone. Together, these references serve to imbue the story with an atmosphere of death, constantly reminding readers of the eeriness and sadness of premature death.

The primary symbol at work in the story, the scarlet ibis, directly parallels Doodle in its journey and serves as an omen of his own fate as it falls victim to forces outside its control. The scarlet ibis—a bird not native to North America, making sightings of it incredibly rare—appears one day in the yard of the boys' home, having been carried there by a **storm**. Brother observes that the bird is beautiful and graceful, but when it attempts to fly its wings are mangled, and it crashes to the ground. He wonders "how many miles it had traveled to die like this, in our yard, beneath the bleeding tree." After Brother discovers Doodle lifeless in the forest, he acknowledges his brother's connection to the bird. Doodle progresses so far past the limitations imposed on him by his disability, only to be overwhelmed by his own storm and at the very end of the story. "The Scarlet Ibis" also parallels, in some ways, the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain kills his younger brother Abel out of jealousy and spite. When God asks where Abel is, he responds, "am I my brother's keeper?" and when God discovers what has happened, Cain is sent into exile. Although the motivations are different, there are clear connections between the stories. Most of *The Scarlet Ibis* takes place in a pastoral setting in which the boys roam free, but the opening (which occurs chronologically after Doodle has died) describes a vision of decaying nature, implying that Brother has left the idyllic world of his childhood behind. Brother betrays Doodle and causes his death, illustrating the same moral message as the Bible story: we must all behave like our brother's keepers. These allusions, combined with the symbol of the ibis and the moments of foreshadowing, strengthen the reader's understanding of Doodle as a tragic figure of innocence whose life is crushed by the selfishness and blindness of those around him.



HUMANS AND NATURE

“The Scarlet Ibis” is filled with many rich descriptions of the natural world. It quickly establishes the rural North Carolina farmland in which the story takes place and draws some of its most important symbols from nature. Beyond providing a detailed vision of the story’s setting, however, Hurst uses descriptions of nature and the seasons to mirror the boys’ states of mind as well as the dynamic between them, and to suggest that, like nature, people can quickly turn volatile and violent.

The opening two paragraphs are two prime examples of this mirroring, as they describe the season of Doodle’s death and how the surroundings have changed since that time. In the first paragraph, Brother depicts a decaying world, using imagery of rotting brown magnolia petals, graveyard flowers, and rank weeds, as well as a bird’s nest that sits “untenanted...like an empty cradle.” These descriptions foreshadow the decay of Brother and Doodle’s excitement in Doodle’s training program and symbolize his eventual death. In the story’s second paragraph, Brother explains that, since Doodle’s death, a grindstone has replaced the old bleeding tree, and he notes how the trill of the birds seems to die as soon as they sing. Nature’s beauty has been lost to Brother, just as Doodle has been lost. These two paragraphs are a good setup for the pattern that Hurst establishes, in which nature provides a mirror image of Brother’s state of mind.

Later in the story, nature helps the boys to connect with one another and reflects their dynamic. Early on, Brother expresses how he wanted a brother so that he would have someone to accompany him to Old Woman Swamp. When Brother realizes how much he does love Doodle, he immediately takes him there “to share with him the only beauty [he] knew.” Before Brother sets out to try to teach Doodle to walk, he describes how he would gather flowers and the two of them would weave them into crowns. This moment of friendship is reflected in the idyllic setting of the swamp. It is spring when Brother plans to teach Doodle to walk, and spring returns when they set out to teach Doodle to race and swim, but when they’ve both grown exhausted, the season has turned to the lazy days of summer.

As the story approaches its tragic conclusion, the violence of nature becomes more and more pervasive. The summer preceding Doodle’s death was “blighted” with a terrible hurricane, and Brother makes a point to mention that the year is 1918, suggesting that perhaps the author meant to remind readers of the devastation of World War I as the boys and their father survey their corn and cotton fields in ruin. The harm that Brother causes Doodle is also reflected in the weather. The **storm** that approaches in the final moments of the story is symbolic of Brother’s cruel and tyrannical treatment of Doodle. As combined forces, the storm and Brother’s cruelty cause Doodle’s death. In this way, the natural world acts as a mirror to the characters and their emotions, reflecting the states of mind

of the two brothers and the dynamics between them and ultimately suggesting that their story is as much a tale of tragedy as it is a tale about humanity and nature.



SYMBOLS

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



THE SCARLET IBIS

The story of the scarlet ibis (a type of bird) directly parallels that of Doodle, as both fall victim to forces outside their own control. The scarlet ibis is not native to North America, but it appears one day in the yard of the boys’ home nevertheless, having been carried there by a **storm**. Brother observes that the bird is beautiful and graceful, but when it attempts to fly its wings are mangled, and it crashes to the ground, dead. Doodle seems to be the only character who truly acknowledges the tragedy of the bird’s death, and he solemnly buries it. Like the ibis, Doodle’s limbs are “uncoordinated,” causing him to fall often. Also like the ibis, Doodle’s death at the end of the story is the direct result of a storm. When Brother discovers Doodle lifeless in the forest, he acknowledges the connection between Doodle and the bird. The scarlet ibis thus represents how something fragile and beautiful can be lost so easily.



THE STORM

Just as **the scarlet ibis** parallels Doodle’s story, the storm is analogous to Brother’s pride and the tyrannical authority he wields over his brother. One storm brings the ibis far from its home in the tropics to North Carolina, where its wings become mangled, leaving it unable to fly. The storm at the very end of the short story—perhaps even the same storm—leads to Doodle’s death, whipping past while the two brothers try to run home. While it is easy to blame the storm for Doodle’s death, the responsibility arguably rests on Brother. Because Brother could not accept Doodle’s failure to become a normal boy, he abandons Doodle, leaving him to fend for himself in the storm. Thus, the storm is symbolic of the devastating effects that human pride and cruelty can have.



COFFIN

When Doodle is born, most people believe that he will not survive very long, and so his parents have a small coffin made for him. Although he ultimately lives to outgrow this coffin, it serves as a reminder of how no one had expected anything of him, and therefore symbolizes the assumptions society makes about those with disabilities. When

Doodle survives several months and then years, the coffin is not thrown away, but is instead stored in the loft in their barn, where it continues to serve as a ghostly reminder that no one believed that Doodle would survive. When Doodle is older, Brother shows him the coffin and forces him to touch it, foreshadowing how Brother eventually provokes Doodle's premature death.



GO-CART

When it becomes clear that Doodle is able to crawl and wants to experience the world, Doodle's father builds him a go-cart so that Brother can pull him around. It signifies the ways in which Doodle works with his limitations, but it also highlights Brother's frustration with Doodle's limitations, as he is made to lug Doodle around wherever he goes. When Doodle learns to walk, he no longer needs the go-cart, and it is placed in the barn loft next to his small **coffin**, foreshadowing that his "development program" will ultimately be the cause of his death.

the season as "dead" and the references to death that immediately follow also foreshadow Doodle's death at the end of the story. Thus, this quote also establishes up how the natural world often mirrors the action of the story as well as the various characters' inner worlds. This relationship between nature and the story's human characters is further strengthened by the narrator's somewhat mysterious reference to a "bleeding tree." "Bleeding" here probably refers to the leaking of sap or other liquid from trees, and the use of the phrase immediately establishes a connection between nature and the human body.

☞ He was born when I was six and was, from the outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, with a tiny body which was red and shriveled like an old man's.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

"The Scarlet Ibis" revolves around Brother's memory of Doodle's life, so it follows that Brother's story starts when Doodle is born. This initial feeling of disappointment and description of Doodle's disability sets up the primary conflict of the piece. Importantly, Brother tells the reader first about his disappointment, and then describes the source of his disappointment. The quote supports the idea that it is not, in fact, Doodle's disability that serves as the main conflict between the two brothers. Instead it is Brother's disappointment in Doodle's disability that propels the action and sets the brothers on the path to trying to overcome Doodle's disability. Brother focuses more on his own feelings than on the feelings or experience of his disabled brother, revealing his prideful, selfish outlook.

☞ Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Creative Education edition of *The Scarlet Ibis* published in 1988.

The Scarlet Ibis Quotes

☞ It was in the clove of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree. The flower garden was strained with rotting brown magnolia petals and ironweeds grew rank amid the purple phlox.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The opening sentence of "The Scarlet Ibis" sets up several key ideas for what's to come. Although readers have not yet been introduced to the narrator of the story, they are introduced to the central symbol of the ibis. The ibis doesn't reappear in the story until much later, but this quote establishes that its appearance is, in many ways, the event toward which the story's trajectory arcs. The description of

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Once Doodle is able to crawl, Brother gives Doodle his nickname because he can only crawl backwards, like a doodlebug. The name his parents had given him was William Armstrong, which Brother had previously remarked was “like tying a big tail on a small kite.” This quote demonstrates how much of Doodle’s life is determined and affected by what people expect of him. His doctor expects him not to live, his parents expect him to limit his experiences, and Brother expects Doodle not to let his disability affect his life at all. These pressures pull at him from all sides, and eventually the most powerful one—the pressure from Brother—leads to his death.

☝ Finally, I could see I was licked. Doodle was my brother and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did, so I dragged him across the burning cotton field to share with him the only beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When Doodle’s father builds him a go-cart, enabling him to be more mobile, Brother initially laments that he has to take Doodle around everywhere he goes, and even tries to turn the cart over in order to discourage Doodle from joining him. Here, he realizes that the bond of brotherhood is not easily dissolved, and that he bears responsibility for his brother whether he likes it or not. He therefore determines that he must share with Doodle his love of the outdoors. This quote reinforces the brothers’ ties to the natural world, showing how their dynamic often mirrors what is happening in nature. In the scheme of the story, this moment they share appreciating the beauty of Old Woman Swamp is one of their moments of greatest tenderness and friendship.

☝ It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it’s a miracle I didn’t give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

When Doodle turns five, Brother is ashamed of having a brother at that age who is unable to walk, so he sets out to teach Doodle. Each time Brother tries to put Doodle upright, Doodle crashes to the ground, but Brother refuses to quit. Here he admits that he wanted to be proud of Doodle, which is not inherently a bad thing. His future self, looking back his childhood, goes on to suggest that pride can be detrimental. Brother often uses metaphors that involve natural imagery, enhancing the connection between human experience and the natural world. Taken together with all the other references to death, this passage gives readers their first sense that Brother’s pride will ultimately play a large part in the event being foreshadowed, which is Doodle’s death.

☝ They did not know that I did it for myself, that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices, and that Doodle walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Aunt Nicey , Doodle’s parents, Doodle

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

When Brother and Doodle show off Doodle’s ability to walk to his parents and Aunt Nicey, Doodle tells them that Brother is the one who taught him. The family is overjoyed that Brother has done this, but he begins to cry out of guilt, and Brother confesses his real motivations to the reader. Once again, Brother references his pride, but this time his descriptions of his pride are much harsher. Describing himself as a “slave” to pride, and admitting that Doodle walked “only” because of his shame, Brother has a rare

moment of self-reflection, seeming understanding that his actions are borne exclusively out of selfishness, and not actually out of the desire to improve his brother's life.

☞ Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in our yard, beneath the bleeding tree.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Just before school begins, in the season that Brother references at the very beginning of the story, the scarlet ibis appears in the family's "bleeding tree" (that is, a tree that is oozing sap or other liquid). As soon as it appears, however, the ibis tries to fly away, and crashes to its death because its wings are mangled. In this way, the appearance of the ibis in the story is a use of symbolism that ties directly to Doodle, whose life is similarly cut short by disability. Thus, Brother's quote here comes to apply just as easily to Doodle, who has come so far, exceeding what people expected from him, only to die because of his brother's hurt pride.

☞ He had failed and we both knew it, so we started back home, racing the storm. We never spoke (What are the words that can solder cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Just after Doodle buries the ibis in their yard, the two brothers race out to try and practice swimming before the

impending storm arrives. Doodle is too tired to swim, and after the brothers try to row, Doodle collapses from exhaustion. Brother acknowledges that Doodle hasn't been able to improve enough to measure up to the other boys in school, but instead of showing his brother compassion, Brother simply wonders what words could fix the shame he felt towards his brother. Brother had set up himself and Doodle for disappointment when he began to expect too much of Doodle. Another facet of this quote is the connection between Brother and the storm, in keeping with the nature parallels throughout the story. The storm is gathering, just as Brother's bitterness and shame builds up before its wrath is unleashed.

☞ I screamed above the pounding storm and threw my body to the earth above his. For a long time, it seemed forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of rain.

Related Characters: Brother (speaker), Doodle

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentence of the story, several of the themes culminate in a full impact brought on by the weight of Doodle's death. Brother's pride directly, though inadvertently, causes his brother's death when he abandons Doodle in the storm. The symbolism of both the ibis and the storm come full circle as Brother explicitly acknowledges the connection between the fallen bird and his fallen brother; likewise, the storm is directly connected to Brother's cruelty, as its climax coincides with Brother's abandonment of Doodle.

The very last words can be a bit hard to interpret, as "heresy" doesn't have the clearest of meanings in the sentence. Often meaning an idea or opinion at odds with what is generally accepted, here heresy may signify something closer to irreverence or mockery. In other words, the rain adds insult to injury in Doodle's death because they had spent so much time appreciating nature and connecting over its beauty, only to have it betray them in a moment not dissimilar to Brother's own betrayal of Doodle.



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 SCARLET IBIS

Brother opens his narration by describing the end of a summer in his past, during which an **ibis** landed “in the bleeding tree.” The birds’ nests were empty, and the flowers were decaying. Brother comments on how much things have changed since that summer. A grindstone has taken the place of the tree, and the songs of the birds seem to “die up in the leaves.” He begins to recount that summer and the events that led up to it, starting with his brother Doodle’s birth.

Doodle is born when Brother is six, and Brother remarks that Doodle is a disappointment. He has a large head and a tiny, shriveled body. His doctor and parents believe that he will die quickly. Only Aunt Nicey has faith that Doodle will live. Assuming that Doodle will die, Doodle’s father has a small **coffin** built for him.

To everyone’s surprise, Doodle lives, and his parents decide to name him William Armstrong. Brother explains how excited he was to have someone to accompany him racing and boxing and climbing trees, but his mother explains that even if Doodle lived, he would never be able to do those things, and she intimates that he may have mental limitations in addition to physical ones. This thought is unbearable to Brother, who plots to smother Doodle, but one day he sees Doodle look at him and smile. This excites Brother and confirms for him that Doodle has normal mental capabilities.

When he is two years old, Doodle begins to try to move by himself. The doctor believes that the strain of this effort could kill Doodle, but Doodle is able to learn to crawl, and he joins the family outside of his bedroom for the first time. Brother takes it upon himself to give his brother the nickname Doodle because he only crawls backwards, like a doodlebug. Brother comments that it was the nicest thing he did for Doodle because no one expects much from someone with a name like Doodle.

Even before introducing himself into the narrative, Brother introduces the recurring theme of nature reflecting the attitudes and dynamics of the characters in the short story. The references to empty nests, decaying flowers, and the “bleeding tree” put readers in Brother’s frame of mind during the time of Doodle’s death. “Bleeding” here probably refers to the leaking of sap or other liquid from trees. Brother’s use of the phrase immediately establishes a connection between nature and the human body.



Brother reveals his own initial reactions to Doodle and those of the other characters, highlighting how Doodle will be forced to either live up to the expectations that others have placed upon him, or disappoint them. The foreshadowing of his premature death continues with the introduction of his tiny coffin.



Brother goes more in-depth into his own thoughts about Doodle. He elaborates on what he expected from a little brother and why he becomes so disappointed in Doodle so quickly, based on his mother’s own false expectations of her son. These two attitudes show the contradictory forces of societal pressure that Doodle faces—on the one hand, to be a normal boy, and on the other, not to achieve anything. The reader can also see the beginning of Brother’s mean streak towards Doodle as he confesses that he plotted to smother Doodle, hinting that Brother, in his cruelty, is capable of killing Doodle.



Yet again the text highlights the unfair expectations placed upon those with disabilities. Left to his own devices, Doodle is able to crawl on his own and survive infancy. Hurst suggests that Doodle’s family, and Brother in particular, only begin to accept him when he is able to achieve this small but formidable step. Brother still believes that Doodle won’t be able to do much, and therefore thinks that giving him a silly nickname is a kindness because people won’t expect very much of him. This is ironic, as Brother himself comes to hold very high expectations of Doodle.



Doodle's father builds Doodle a **go-cart** so that he can join Brother outside, and soon it becomes Brother's responsibility to take him outside whenever he wants to go out and play. Brother describes how much of a burden Doodle is. The doctor says that he can't get "too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and that he must always be treated gently." Brother tries to discourage Doodle from coming with him by pulling the go-cart very fast and running around corners, sometimes tipping him over.

Brother finally realizes how much he loves Doodle, and is able to share his love of nature his brother. He takes Doodle to Old Woman Swamp, where the two of them weave flowers into necklaces and crowns for themselves.

Brother admits that he also has a mean streak towards Doodle. One afternoon he takes Doodle up to the barn loft to show him his **coffin**, and will not bring Doodle down until he touches it. Doodle, afraid of being stranded, touches the coffin and screams in terror. Brother brings him down, but Doodle begs over and over again, "Don't leave me."

Doodle is now five years old and still unable to walk. Brother is embarrassed at having a brother of that age who can't walk, so he decides to teach Doodle. Doodle doesn't understand why Brother wants to teach him, and tells him that everyone says he can't walk. Brother tries to teach Doodle anyway, and sets him on his feet. Each time he does this, Doodle quickly collapses.

Eventually, Doodle is able to stand by himself for a few seconds, which encourages Brother to keep trying. On Doodle's sixth birthday, they reveal his ability to his family, and he demonstrates how he can walk slowly across the room. His parents and Aunt are overjoyed at seeing Doodle walk. Brother begins to cry because he knows that he only helped Doodle out of his own pride.

Doodle's go-cart provides him a means of working with his disability and trying to progress on his own terms. Meanwhile, Brother still views Doodle's disability as an extreme disappointment, and the appearance of the go-cart means that Doodle's disability is now a burden and responsibility that he himself must bear, as well. However, the ability for the two of them to play outside together, surrounded by nature, ultimately kindles a stronger bond of brotherhood between them.



Brother's love for Doodle grows with their ability to be outside together, linking the strength of their relationship with the natural world. Here their idyllic setting both reflects and fosters their brotherly friendship.



Hurst again foreshadows Doodle's death (and the fact that Brother causes it) when Brother forces Doodle to touch his coffin. Doodle's repeated begging here mirrors the end of the short story, in which he begs his brother not to abandon him.



This is the first time that Brother mentions shame and pride when speaking about Doodle. Now that Doodle has become his responsibility, Brother takes it upon himself to make sure that Doodle is not an embarrassment to him. Doodle, for his own part, seems content to work within his own abilities and progress at his own pace. Doodle will continue to collapse repeatedly through the end of the story, signaling that Brother is pushing too hard and expecting too much from him.



Doodle's achievements and the joy of his family highlight their expectations for him. They never thought that he would be able to walk and are overwhelmed with pride in both of their sons. But Brother privately acknowledges his true motivations. Although he has brought a lot of happiness to his family by helping Doodle, he understands that his actions were purely selfish.



Doodle's walking improves, and his **go-cart** is put in the loft next to his **coffin**. When he and Brother walk together, taking frequent breaks, they tell lies and stories to pass the time. Doodle tells a story about a boy in a golden robe who is protected in his sleep by a magnificent peacock. The two of them also talk about their futures, and how they would build a house of leaves with swamp birds for chickens. They'd swing through vines and their parents could even live with them.

Now that he has taught Doodle to walk, Brother believes that he could teach Doodle anything. He plans a development program in which he would teach Doodle to run, swim, climb trees, and fight. They plan to accomplish these goals within a year, before Doodle starts school so that he can keep up with other boys.

Doodle and Brother don't make much progress in the winter because Doodle is sick and Brother is in school, but during the spring they begin working on Brother's development program. Brother describes how "promise hung about [them] like the leaves."

The story jumps ahead to summer. There is no rain for the crops and then a hurricane tears through the family's cotton and corn fields. That same summer (the summer of 1918), Doodle and Brother hear whispers of strange names: Chateau-Thierry, Amiens, and Soissons. At dinner, Mama also comments on a family who lost their son at Belleau Wood.

The storyline has now arrived at the end of the summer to which Brother referred at the story's opening. Doodle has not made as much progress as Brother would have liked. He pushes Doodle harder and harder, and one day Doodle collapses. Brother asks Doodle if he wants to be different from everybody else. At night, Doodle grows sick and has nightmares.

Doodle's progress allows him to be mobile, but the fact that he is able to walk and no longer needs the go-cart opens the floodgates for Brother to push him even harder. The stories that Doodle makes up subtly foreshadow his death, as he describes a vision of his future too fantastical to ever exist. His story about the peacock is perhaps symbolic of his relationship to his brother, whom he sees as a protector—and who, like the peacock, is prideful and show-offy.



The pride that Brother felt in teaching Doodle to walk furthers Brother's desire for Doodle to become more normal. He doesn't want to be embarrassed that his brother can't keep up with the other boys, and so he sets very high expectations through his development program.



As time passes, nature continues to reflect the boys' lives. In winter, when nothing is growing, they make no progress. In the spring, when everything begins to come to life, they become hopeful about what they'll be able to accomplish. Thus, the characters themselves begin to seem like forces of nature, the tragic trajectory of their lives seemingly inevitable.



Nature begins to reflect the dynamics of the broader world as well as the lives of Doodle and Brother. In this passage, it's possible that Hurst meant to suggest a parallel between the destruction of the cotton and cornfields and the devastation of World War I, which was ongoing during the summer of 1918.



At the end of the summer, Brother's pride and disappointment once again manifest in ugly ways. He is upset that Doodle will not be able to keep up with other boys, and unfairly takes out his frustration on Doodle. His efforts start to wear away at Doodle, who continues with the plan because he wants his brother and family to be proud of him. However, as Doodle's "development program" becomes increasingly strenuous, it raises the question of how his life may have been different had his family simply accepted him as he is.



A few days before school starts, Doodle, Brother, their parents, and their Aunt are having lunch. They hear a strange sound in the yard, and they discover a large **red bird** in their bleeding tree. As soon as they see it, the bird attempts to fly, but its wings are “uncoordinated,” and it crashes to the ground.

They discover in their bird book that it is a **scarlet ibis**. The bird lives in the tropics, and Daddy guesses that it must have been carried up to North Carolina by a **storm**. Doodle insists on burying the **ibis**, singing “Shall We Gather at the River” as he digs a hole in the flower garden. When he is finished, he returns to the dining room, and Aunt Nicey comments that red dead birds are bad luck.

When Doodle and Brother have finished eating, they rush off to continue their development program. They race out to the woods, but Doodle says he is too tired to swim, so they row instead. A **storm** begins to gather.

Lightning starts to appear in the sky, and Doodle and Brother return to shore. Doodle collapses in the mud out of exhaustion. Brother reflects that Doodle had failed, and both of them knew it. They begin to return home, trying to beat the **storm**. As Brother walks faster and faster, Doodle struggles to keep up with him, and he shouts for Brother not to leave him.

Brother confesses that the fact that his plans had come to nothing awakened “a streak of cruelty” in him. He runs as fast as he can away from Doodle as the rain begins to fall, and soon he can no longer hear Doodle’s cries. When his bitterness subsides, Brother stops to wait for Doodle. Doodle does not come, so Brother turns back to find him.

The initial descriptions of the ibis begin to connect it to Doodle. Its uncoordinated wings, which make it unable to fly normally and cause it to crash to the ground, are similar to the physical disabilities that Doodle has. Although there have been many references to death up until this point, this is the first time that death is actually present in the story. Again, what takes place in the natural world mirrors (or in this case foreshadows) the fates of the characters.



Doodle is very moved by the death of the ibis. His instinctive sense of connectedness to the fallen bird suggests that he himself feels extremely helpless. The ibis’s death at the hands of a storm parallels Doodle’s own death at the hands of a storm later in the story. Thus, his own storyline is reflected in the nature around him. Aunt Nicey highlights this foreshadowing by commenting that the bird is a bad omen.



Although it is only a few days before school, Brother refuses to let up on his expectations for Doodle. Brother’s own symbolic counterpart, the storm, begins to gather as he relentlessly forces Doodle to row even as Doodle grows more and more exhausted—suggesting that Brother is as brutal in his treatment of Doodle as a raging storm.



Brother’s stubbornness becomes more dangerous as lightning strikes around them, and more dangerous to Doodle as he is overcome by exhaustion. Brother is ashamed and frustrated with Doodle’s failure, and as his pride starts to grow, so does the storm, heightening their symbolic connection. Doodle’s cries echo his own plea, from earlier in the story, when Brother threatened to leave him in the barn loft—thus reminding the reader of how many times Brother’s pride has already hurt Doodle.



Brother’s pride and the mercilessness born from it reach their peak in this passage. Here, as throughout this final episode in the story, the storm’s heaviness matches Brother’s cruelty and its consequences.



Brother finds Doodle under a red nightshade bush, but when he goes to pull Doodle up, Doodle falls backwards, limply, onto the ground. He has been bleeding from the mouth and blood runs onto his neck and down his front. Brother tries to shake Doodle awake, but he is no longer alive. Brother begins to weep. He screams Doodle's name through the deafening **storm**, and tries to shelter his "fallen **scarlet ibis**" from the rain.

The vision of Doodle at this moment parallels the death of the ibis. This symbolism is reinforced by the appearance of the color red staining his neck and shirt, as Brother acknowledges in the final sentence, thereby making the symbolism of both the ibis and the storm explicit. The themes of pride and death also culminate in the ending, as Brother's pride directly, though inadvertently, caused Doodle's death when he abandoned him. Brother not only has to live with the loss of his brother, but with the knowledge that it was his own pride, selfishness, and cruelty that caused his brother's death.





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