

Should Wizard Hit Mommy?



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN UPDIKE

John Updike was raised by working-class parents in Berks County, Pennsylvania. He attended Harvard College, where he won the Scholastic Art and Writing award and was a frequent contributor to the Harvard Lampoon literary review. There he met and married his first wife, Mary Pennington, with whom he had four children. After graduating Suma Cum Laude, he attended the Ruskin School of Fine Art at Oxford University with ambitions to become a cartoonist, but he ultimately moved back to the United States and began a career at *The New Yorker*, during which time he published hundreds of his own short stories and poems in the magazine before becoming an independent novelist. Drawing on his humble, protestant upbringing, Updike's body of work concerns "the American small town, Protestant middle class." He is best known for his "Rabbit" series, which chronicled several decades in the life of an American middle class man (Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom), and for which he won two Pulitzer Prizes for fiction. Updike published more than a twenty novels and numerous short story collections throughout his life. He died from lung cancer in 2009, at the age of seventy-six.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though this story was written at the end of the 1950s, understanding the decade that preceded its publication is important to understanding the story. Following the end of World War Two and the passage of the GI Bill (which gave houses and paying jobs to returning veterans) many young American couples moved out of urban centers and into the suburbs to start families. As the impetus to settle grew, so too did the idea of the "ideal American family" which was reinforced by a golden age of advertising that targeted young wives in particular, presenting people with an unattainable image of domestic bliss. The pressures of domestic life were pushed to the background during the Cold War, during which Americans lived in constant fear of nuclear warfare. In "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" John Updike is reflecting the pressure of family life. Although living the American dream was supposed to bring people happiness, it was often stifling and unfulfilling in reality, placing a strain on couples like Jack and Clare, who have no outlet to express or address their growing unhappiness.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Updike's work is compared most often to the work of John Cheever. The two men built parallel careers out of writing about the often dark and complex realities lurking beneath the

placid surface of suburban, middle-class life in America from the perspectives of men. Cheever's most famous short story, "The Swimmer," is an allegorical tale that, like "Should Wizard Hit Mommy," deals with one man's disenchantment with his picturesque life in the suburbs. In terms of Updike's own work, his "Rabbit" series (which includes *Rabbit Run*, *Rabbit Redux* and *Rabbit is Rich* among others) is the most famous example of Updike's enduring and revered style. Indeed, critics have compared his protagonist, Rabbit Angstrom, to other male literary heroes like Jay Gatsby and Holden Caulfield because of Updike's willingness to portray the basest parts of masculine desire in characters of unusual intelligence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Should Wizard Hit Mommy
- **When Written:** 1959
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** June 13, 1959
- **Literary Period:** Modern American Fiction
- **Genre:** Short story; semi-autobiographical fiction
- **Setting:** Jack and Clare's family home
- **Climax:** Jo insists that the wizard should refuse to restore Roger Skunk's terrible smell and should hit Roger's mother instead
- **Antagonist:** Jack feels a deep resentment stemming from his obligations to his family. While his family members themselves are not antagonists, Jack's sense of costly self-sacrifice and confinement in an unhappy home life antagonize him throughout the story.
- **Point of View:** Third person limited; Updike writes in third person through Jack's eyes

EXTRA CREDIT

Two-Time Winner. John Updike won two Pulitzer prizes for fiction for his *Rabbit* series. He is one of only three writers to do so, joining William Faulkner and Booth Tarkington.

The Feminist Problem. Though universally esteemed for his work, feminist scholars, writers and literary critics challenged Updike for his limited portrayals of female characters in his work and the overt and often violent misogyny of his central male characters. Updike referred to these critics as his "feminist detractors" and did not apologize for his perspectives.

His Greatest Critic. In addition to being a prolific writer of fiction, Updike was also a noted literary and art critic. In a published list of his personal rules for literary criticism, Updike

cautions, “Try to understand what the author wishes to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt.”



PLOT SUMMARY

On Saturday afternoon, Jack is about to put his daughter Jo down for a nap. Every evening and before Saturday naptimes, Jack tells his daughter a bedtime story. The father-daughter tradition began when Jo (now four-years-old) was two and it continues despite the fact that Jo rarely falls asleep in naps anymore and Jack is quickly running out of ideas for stories. To help his task, Jack always tells his daughter a story that follows the same basic format: an animal (always named Roger, but always a different type of animal) has a problem that he needs help solving. He goes to wise owl, who suggests that Roger should see the wizard about his issue. The wizard provides a cure and asks Roger for payment that he cannot provide but also tells him where to find the extra money. Roger then pays the wizard and happily goes to play with the other animals until it is time for his father to come home from work, and that is the end of the story.

Once Jo is settled in, Jack begins the Saturday story. Jo explains that Roger should be a skunk this time, which makes Jack think that she has been studying skunks in school. Freshly inspired by Jo's suggestion, and by memories of being bullied as a child, Jack spins a tale about Roger Skunk, who smelled so bad that none of the other animals wanted to play with him. As the story continues, however, Jo (who has memorized her father's story form) becomes more and more intent on controlling the direction of the narrative. Jack is intent on finishing the story so that he can help his wife Clare, who is downstairs re-painting the **living room**. Clare is six months pregnant with their third child and should not be doing manual work or heavy lifting. Jack tells Jo to stop trying to control the plot, and to try to fall asleep instead. Jack explains to Jo that Roger goes to the Owl who in turn sends him to the wizard who performs a magic spell. Jo (who has recently begun questioning the truth of the things people tell her) asks Jack if magic spells are real. This question irks Jack, and he doubles down on making his storytelling more captivating.

Jack tells Jo that the wizard performs a spell to make Roger Skunk smell like roses. Jo seems to be enthralled by Jack's impression of the wizard casting his spell, but Jack suspects she might be feigning interest, since her face looks the way his wife Clare's does when she is pretending to be interested in cocktail party conversation. Indeed, as the story reaches its climax, Jo grows all the more fussy and distracted. Jack, who hates when women are not interested in what he is saying, changes the structure of his story in hopes of re-capturing his daughter's interest. He tells her that when Roger came home from the wizard's house, his mother was furious. Instead of being happy that he had changed his **smell**, she is angry. She demands that

they return to the wizard so he can change Roger back and his mother can hit the wizard over the head. Jo, who does not expect this twist, is beside herself, unable to grasp why the skunk's mother would not allow her son to change something about himself that made the other animals run away from him. She demands that Jack change the story: she wants the wizard to refuse to change Roger back, and to hit Roger's “stupid mommy” over the head with his wand. Unprepared for his daughter's intensity and violent wish, Jack attempts to explain that Roger was better off with his old smell because it was what his mother wanted and he loved his mother more than he cared what the other animals thought about him.

Thoroughly tired, Jack brings story time to an end and urges Jo to go to sleep. Jo, in turn, demands that, in tomorrow's story, the wizard must hit Roger Skunk's mother over the head instead. Jack does not answer her, and instead goes downstairs to finally help his wife. When he gets downstairs however, Jack is too weary to help, and instead sits in a chair and watches his wife repaint their living room. He sees the molding in their house as a cage surrounding him and his wife. He has no desire to work with her or even talk to her or touch her.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jack – The protagonist of the story, Jack is a married man living with his pregnant wife Clare, their four-year-old daughter Jo, and their two-year-old son, Bobby. Uninspired by and disillusioned with the responsibilities of family life, Jack uses the stale ritual of telling his daughter a bedtime story to avoid helping his wife re-paint their living room to prepare for the arrival of their third child. A talented storyteller, Jack takes pride in creating engrossing stories for Jo even though he is quickly running out of fresh ideas. Each story concerns an animal named Roger who has a problem that is solved by the story's end. Much like Jack's life, the stories follow a strict and unchallenging pattern and contain hallmarks of domesticity: each story begins with Roger at home with his mother and end with his father's return from work on the train each night for supper. In telling the stories, Jack is able to indulge his gift for creating suspense and his love of language, even when the references go over Jo's head. Jack crafts Roger Skunk in his own image: a skunk who is isolated from other animals much like Jack was as a young boy. Roger is lonely because of his **smell**, which he is ultimately unable to change out of a sense of duty to his mother. Though Jo is unaware, Jack is channeling his frustration in his marriage into the story, and becomes increasingly upset when Jo contradicts him, as it reminds him of Clare. Ultimately, Jack is unable to tell a story that engrosses Jo, who is furious that Roger Skunk must keep his original foul smell. Jo insists that Jack tell her a story in which Roger's mother is physically punished for contributing to Roger's

isolation and unhappiness. Jack is shocked to see Jo's animosity towards the mother figure in the story because it reflects his own animosity towards Clare and their life together: a life in which Jack feels increasingly trapped and has come to resent Clare not as his partner in the struggle, but as his principle tormenter.

Jo – Jack and Clare's four-year-old daughter, Jo is a growing girl. She is growing taller by the day, has begun to contradict things her parents tell her, and (to Jack's great frustration) no longer falls asleep at nap time. All of these traits worry and upset Jack because he realizes he will soon have another woman in his life contradicting him the way his wife Clare does. Indeed, Jo is intent on exercising her opinions and having her ideas heard, even at a young age. With respect to the story of Roger Skunk, Jo does not agree with the ending that her father proposes. As a young child, Jo relates to Roger's desire to be accepted by his peers, and she does not understand why Roger's mother would force him to return to his original scent when it made the other little animals run away. While Jack perceives Roger's sacrifice of his new sweet smell to be a positive lesson about duty and obligation to one's family, Jo is too young to understand the concept of sacrifice, and therefore believes Roger's mother to be the villain of the story who deserves punishment. In addition, Jo's suggestion that the wizard should hit Roger's mother for her transgression suggests that Jo has picked up on the unhappy (and potentially violent) nature of her parents' marriage. Unbeknownst to her, her parents' dissatisfaction is coloring all aspects of her life—even something as seemingly innocuous as a bedtime story.

Roger Skunk – The protagonist of the story Jack tells Jo, Roger Skunk is in many ways a stand-in for Jack. Bullied for his foul skunk **smell** much like Jack was bullied as a child, Roger wants nothing more than to fit in and play with the other animals. However, he ultimately acquiesces to his mother's wishes and accepts that his smell cannot be changed because it is part of who he is. Roger's journey proves challenging and polarizing to Jack and Jo because both people project a different part of themselves onto him. At four-years-old, Jo wants nothing more than to fit in among her peers, and is therefore horrified when Jack says that Roger's mother makes Roger return to his former smell (which had made the other animals dislike him). For Jack on the other hand, Roger's willingness to return to his original smell represents his sense of duty toward his family and mirrors Jack's responsibilities to his own family, which he accepts even when resents or feels constrained by them. While Jack perhaps intends Roger's story to teach Jo about this kind of familial duty, she is still too young to grasp the unpleasant concept of compromise and sacrifice, and is heartbroken that Roger is not able to smell the way he wants, showing her innocent desire for happiness without compromise.

Clare – Unseen until the final moments of the story, Clare's

presence is felt by Jack throughout the story, as he can hear her moving **furniture** in the living room under Jo's bedroom. Clare is six-months pregnant, and is repainting and re-arranging the living room, a task that Jack should be helping with but which he is delaying as long as possible. Jack and Clare's marriage is not a happy one, and although he does not express his feelings to her directly, Jack has grown increasingly resentful toward his wife, whom he feels continually contradicts and undermines him. Even when Clare is not physically present, Jack feels her derision and disdain reflected in their young daughter, Jo, who is growing to look increasingly like Clare and does things that remind Jack of Clare's behavior. Ultimately, Jack is not only unwilling to help Clare move their furniture despite her pregnancy, but he is so angry at her that he refuses to even look at her or speak to her. He sees her as the symbol of his own unhappiness and unfulfilled desire.

The Wizard – The Wizard is the character in Jack's stories who usually presents the solution to whatever problem Roger is facing. He does this by performing a magic spell that reverses Roger's predicament, making Roger very happy. In the story of Roger Skunk, however, the wizard is the antagonist, changing Roger's scent against the wishes of Roger's mother, and therefore altering one of Roger's innate biological traits. The wizard also proves a divisive character for Jack and Jo. Jo believes that the wizard's actions were justified, and therefore he has every right to hit Roger's mother and refuse to reverse his spell. Jack, on the other hand, sides with Roger's mother and believes that the wizard should reverse the spell to make Roger's mother happy. In this way, the Wizard represents a sense of freedom from obligation, as he enables Roger to do the things he wants to do without regard for the consequences or his family's feelings. Too young to have her own sense of personal duty, Jo is unable to understand how the Wizard could be wrong, but Jack, who sees himself as having compromised many of his goals and much of his freedom out of a sense of duty, knows that the wizard cannot win.

Roger's Mother – Roger Skunk's mother is the wizard's antagonist, and a representation for Jack of familial duty. Roger's mother refuses to allow Roger to change his skunk scent—even though smelling like roses makes him more popular—offering the explanation that he no longer smells like he is supposed to. Her ultimate victory over the wizard, who eventually restores Roger's original skunk smell, suggests a victory of familial obligation over the freedom to follow one's own desires without regard for others. For Jo, who, at four-years-old, cannot think of anything more important than fitting in, Roger Skunk's mother is therefore the villain of the story.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Owl – A character in the classic Roger story, the Owl always listens to Roger's initial predicament and suggest that he go see the wizard so that the wizard can perform a spell to

solve the problem.

Bobby – Jack’s two-year old son. Bobby remains asleep for the duration of the Roger Skunk story.



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.



MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND MISOGYNY

One of the hallmarks of John Updike’s writing is his strong masculine protagonists and commitment to the male perspective. Throughout his career,

Updike chose to write through the eyes of working class American men as a way of illuminating how they saw the world. However, because he prioritizes masculinity and maleness as a desired trait, many of Updike’s male protagonists are also latent—or sometimes overt—misogynists, who take their frustrations out on the women in their lives. In “Should Wizard Hit Mommy?,” Jack’s resentment of his wife, Clare, is just one expression of a greater animosity he feels toward his family and home for the ways in which he has sacrificed for them, while they have only further boxed him in. He also projects this animosity onto his young daughter, Jo, whom he views as another woman who seeks to contradict and abuse him.

Throughout the story, Jack is preoccupied with outlining the ways in which he fulfills his roles as “man of the house”: completing his duties to his family even when it is difficult and unpleasant for him to do so. For example, Jack makes it clear immediately that he has grown to find Saturday story time tiresome, even though it is a duty he must continue to perform. He says that telling the same story “was especially fatiguing on Saturday, because Jo never fell asleep in naps anymore.” He continues however, because he views it as a commitment and one of his duties as her father. In a similar vein, Jack notes that he should be helping Claire move **furniture** downstairs. “She shouldn’t be moving heavy things,” he explains “she was six-months pregnant.” Here, Jack again calls attention to the tedious drudgery of his duties as a husband and father. At the story’s end, Jack watches Claire move furniture, too fatigued—and resentful—to help her.

Jack channels this same resentment towards Jo, viewing her dislike of the Roger Skunk story as another attempt by a woman to confine and undermine him. He reacts to Clare and Jo’s behavior in the same way even though one is an adult woman and one is a child. Both his wife and daughter make him feel negatively toward women in general. For example, when Jo begins to fuss when she doesn’t like the trajectory of Jack’s

story, he gets incredibly frustrated. “Jack didn’t like women when they took anything for granted,” Updike writes; “he liked them apprehensive, hanging on his words.” This may seem a disproportionately harsh reaction to have to a four-year-old’s loss of interest during story time, but Jack repeatedly goes out of his way while telling Jo the story to make her feel trepidation or discomfort, and becomes instantly angry when she does not seem thrilled by the story she is hearing. For example, when Jo makes a sad face “without a touch of sincerity,” Jack is irked, seeing it as an attempt on his daughter’s part to undermine his storytelling. Jo’s disinterest also indicates that she has learned the structure of Jack’s story, and she repeatedly indicates that she feels she could take control of the narrative herself. Jack sees this loss of narrative control as another attempt by a woman to undermine him. In addition, Jo’s extreme anger at Roger Skunk’s mother for making Roger return to his former **smell** suggests that Jack’s ire at women (and specifically Clare) is something that he probably does not keep well-hidden, and has informed the way Jo thinks about her parents’ roles in her own life as well as in the story. Indeed, both Jo’s fierce exclamations that the skunk’s mother is “a stupid mommy,” and her conviction that Roger’s mother deserves to be physically punished for her transgression, suggest that she has potentially been exposed to both verbal and physical violence directed against her own mother.

This assumption is supported by the way that Jack overreacts when Jo’s behavior reminds him of Clare. For example, Jack continually points to evidence of Jo’s physical growth, referring to Jo’s “tall body” (an odd descriptor for a four-year-old) “fat face,” and “pudgy little arms,” which indicate a level of animosity and disgust that are out of place for a father to feel towards his own young daughter. However, Jack also often comments on Jo’s features or expression in situations where Jo reminds him of Clare. He explains that Jo’s eyes are “her mother’s blue,” and that Jo’s “wide, noiseless grin” reminds him of “his wife feigning pleasure at cocktail parties.” This complicates Jack’s animosity towards Jo and her body because it indicates that Jack grows to resent Jo more as she ages simply because she is turning into a miniature version of his wife. Coupled with her newfound desire to contradict his stories, Jack is increasingly unable to distinguish between the two women in his life, and takes out his feelings of animosity towards Clare on Jo.

Many literary critics, especially throughout the feminist movement, critiqued John Updike for misogynistic depictions of women and overtly sexist perspectives in his central male characters. Updike refuted what he called his “feminist detractors,” but there is no doubt that his highly-personal, masculine narratives concern men who see themselves as having been sapped of by their virility by domestic life. Jack is no exception; by lumping Clare and Jo together as women (despite their many obvious differences as people) and fixating on the ways in which he believes they seek to undermine his

authority and power, Jack reveals his own overt misogyny toward his female family members, as well as his distrust of and dislike for women in general. Importantly, his misplaced frustration towards—and seeming disgust for—Jo stems from his fear that she will soon grow into a woman like Clare, and therefore continue to malign and abuse him.



DUTY, CONFORMITY, AND FITTING IN

“Should Wizard Hit Mommy?” deals with the question of what it means to fit in, and the price one pays for fulfilling one’s duties and conforming to

others’ expectations. While Jo (and Roger Skunk) want desperately to fit in, Jack hates conforming to the expectations of domestic life, and wants desperately to escape them. However, while Jo believes Roger will be able to simply change his life with a wave of a wizard’s wand, Jack knows that certain things cannot be changed and that, much like Roger Skunk cannot escape his own **smell**, Jack cannot escape his own home life.

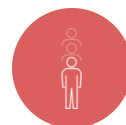
Jack becomes engrossed in the tale of Roger Skunk because it reminds him of his own childhood being bullied and ostracized. However, he ultimately wants to teach Jo a lesson that every person has innate characteristics and responsibilities that they have to accept and cannot change. Jo is unable to grasp this concept as a four-year-old, and, as a result, believes Roger Skunk’s mother is cruel for not allowing him to have the thing he wants most: the acceptance of his peers. Jack is “remembering certain humiliations of his own childhood” as he enthusiastically describes the way Roger Skunk’s fellow animals would taunt him. These details make Jack feel vindicated, but they only make Jo more upset. In fact, Jo is beside herself when she hears that that Roger Skunk’s mother will not allow him to smell like roses. “But Daddy,” she cries, “then he said about all the other little animals *run away*.” For Jo, the concept of not being liked by her peers is truly terrible and she cannot understand why the skunk’s mother doesn’t feel the same way. Confused by Jo’s anger, Jack attempts to teach her that a skunk’s smell is part of who he is, and that his love for his mother is greater than his desire to fit in by changing his smell. Jack explains that Roger “loved his mommy more than he loved aaaaalll the other animals. And she knew what was right.”

Much like Roger Skunk’s scent, Jack views his domestic and familial duties to be something that he cannot change or give up, however negatively they make him feel. For example, family plays a key role in the stories that Jack tells Jo. Roger always starts the day at home with his mother and comes back home “just in time to hear the train whistle that brought his daddy home from Boston.” This detail suggests that Jack is telling a story that mimics Jo’s daily routine (in which, presumably, Jo also stays at home with her mother and Jack returns in time for dinner each evening). Much like the routine of story time, Jack is becoming more and more fatigued with the burdens and

responsibilities of family life. Indeed, whenever he is confronted with a familial duty within the story, Jack reports becoming tired or unhappy. He explains that “his head felt empty” of more stories to tell Jo, but the prospect of putting her to sleep and helping Clare repaint their living room makes him equally unhappy. Like his trusty story form, Jack views his life as a routine that is a “cage,” slowly choking out his joy in life. However, just as he explains to Jo that Roger Skunk accepts his scent out of love for and trust in his mother, Jack understands that he cannot leave his life out of obligation to Clare and his (growing) family.

Jack’s deep unhappiness with his life comes to a head at the end of the story when he finally goes downstairs to help Clare. Without Roger Skunk’s narrative to mask his resentment towards his wife, it becomes clear that he feels trapped in a life that he is unable to make magically disappear. Despite knowing that he should be helping his immensely pregnant wife move **furniture**, Jack sits down “with utter weariness, watching his wife labor.” This suggests that Jack considers telling his daughter a story to be a greater burden than his wife’s very real physical exertion. This sense of weariness stems from the fact that Jack feels trapped within his life. Describing the interior of Jack’s family home, Updike writes: “The woodwork, a cage of moldings and rails and baseboards all around them, was half old tan and half new ivory and he felt caught in an ugly middle position, and though he as well felt his wife’s presence in the cage with him, he did not want to speak with her, work with her, touch her, anything.”

Faced with the arrival of a new child and the expansion of a family that he already feels to be constraining, Jack feels himself caught in limbo. Much like his half-painted living room, he has one foot in his old life and one foot in the possibility of a future with a bigger family and even more responsibilities weighing him down. This state of unhappiness influences the story that Jack tells his young daughter, who only wants her protagonist to fit in and be happy and comfortable. However, because Jack feels trapped by his own duties as a husband and father, he is unable to provide a happy ending that he feels he will never experience himself. In this way, Updike suggests that by conforming to the expectations of family life, men must prioritize their duties above their individual desires. Just like Roger Skunk gives up his chance at fitting in because his mother does not like his new scent, Updike suggests that Jack compromised his individuality and happiness when he became a husband and father.



GROWING UP AND LOSS OF INNOCENCE

Updike’s story addresses the ways in which children lose their innocence as they grow up, trading an unquestioning sense of wonder for a desire to understand the world around them more fully—often by

challenging what they have been told, or by breaking the rules. In “Should Wizard Hit Mommy,” Jack’s fundamental problem with Jo is that he is no longer able to control her and command her attention in the way he used to. As Jo grows up, she has started questioning Jack’s narratives instead of blindly accepting them. This process of growth and rebellion scares Jack not only because it points to a failure in his ability as a storyteller, but because he views growing up as a journey away from the escape of fiction and magic towards the constraints of duties and family life. By trying to maintain control of the story, therefore, Jack also tries to prolong his daughter’s innocence and reconnect with his own.

For Jack, the main sign that Jo has begun to grow up is her desire to question everything he tells her. This habit upsets Jack because it indicates that she is beginning to craft her own ideas and beliefs, which he will no longer be able to control. The fact that Jo suggests that Roger be a skunk makes Jack think that “they must be talking about skunks at nursery school.” This shows that Jack is aware that his daughter is bringing outside knowledge into his storytelling space—and it does not seem to be the first time she has done this. When Jo asks Jack if magic is “real,” he explains that “this was a new phase, just this last month, a reality phase. When he told her that spiders eat bugs, she turned to her mother and asked, ‘do they *really*?’” For Jack, Jo’s focus on reality is at odds with his desire to craft a reality for her through storytelling, a job that requires complete confidence from his audience. However, Jo continues to have more questions as the story goes along. When Jack brings up the Wizard, for example, Jo immediately wants to know if the Wizard is going to die and is not calmed when Jack tells her that “wizards don’t die.”

Jo’s preoccupation with truthful storytelling means that she is also consistently challenging Jack’s attempts to craft a story that exists *beyond* the confines of reality, and to reconnect with his own sense of childlike innocence as well as hers. For example, Jack sticks to the same basic structure every time he tells his daughter a story because it is unchallenging and promises a happy ending, even though this is decidedly unrealistic. Although Jack finds the story form “fatiguing,” it is also completely free from conflict: every problem is presented with the solution in hand. For instance, the formula dictates that the wizard always demands, as payment, a greater number of pennies than Roger has, while “in the same breath directing the animal to the place where the extra pennies could be found.” For her part, Jo has reached the point where she will not accept such an easy resolution. When she sees that Roger Skunk and his Mother fundamentally disagree on his **smell**, she is unhappy with her father’s simple resolution. In Jo’s version of the story, “the wizard hit [the mother] on the head and did not change the little skunk back.” Jack is unsettled by Jo’s suggestion because it removes the innocence of the story that he is trying to tell, and replaces it with a tale of conflict that

mirrors the kind that Jack experiences in his life. While Jack views his storytelling as an opportunity to escape the stresses of his reality, Jo’s perception of her parents’ flawed relationship is making her unable to countenance a happy ending.

Jack’s displeasure with Jo’s reaction to the Roger Skunk story is primarily about control. For him, Jo growing up means that she will no longer blindly accept the things he says as true, but will instead reach her own conclusions and fight for her own beliefs, even when they directly contradict her father’s. By challenging and appearing uninterested by his story, Jack believes Jo is acting just like her mother—a reality he neither likes nor accepts. When Jo gets bored with his narrative, for example, Jack explains that he “didn’t like when women *took* anything for granted.” This observation indicates that Jack views his daughter’s disinterest as an adult quality, replacing a sense of wonder with boredom and cynicism. Ultimately, however, Jack cannot get around Jo’s cynicism. Jo flatly refuses to accept Jack’s story because it does not end in the way she wants, and the characters are not behaving in a way that she thinks is truthful or correct. She even goes so far as to tell Jack how she wants the story to go the following night: “Tomorrow I want you to tell me a story that the wizard took that magic wand and hit that mommy.” This exchange represents a turning point for Jack in his relationship with his daughter. Not only is she no longer engrossed by his stories, but she is now writing her own stories, and Jack lacks the willpower to reassert his own desires or challenge his daughter’s desires about how the story should end.

Jo’s strongly-worded declaration at the end of the story shows that the nature of her relationship to her father has fundamentally changed. Whereas story time used to function as a space where both she and her father could embrace their imaginations and sense of innocence, it is now an arena where a perpetual power struggle plays out—in which both seem to be processing very real aspects of their family dynamic. By the end of the story, Jack views his relationship with his wife and daughter to be roughly the same. In both he views himself as being beleaguered, fatigued, taken for granted, and—most importantly—out of control of the plot. Jack’s preoccupation with the signs of Jo’s growth (both physical and emotional) highlight the ways in which he is fixated on her personal growth, as she becomes more wayward and less innocent. As far as Jack is concerned, innocence means a willingness to accept everything that is told to you without issue. Therefore, Jo’s loss of innocence is equivalent not only to Jack’s loss of control over her, but to his realization that one day, she may exert control over him in the same way that Clare does.



STORYTELLING AND CONTROL

In “Should Wizard Hit Mommy?” the process of crafting a story is as important as the story itself. Indeed, Jack uses the Roger Skunk story to exercise

control and decisiveness that he feels like he no longer possesses in his own life, and also to delay helping his pregnant wife, Clare, repaint **the living room** (and, in the process, delay confronting the fact that his family is about to get bigger). Far from merely a mechanism to get his daughter to sleep, the story becomes a way for Jack to re-contextualize his personal unhappiness, exercising total control over his simple narrative to compensate for a lack of control he feels in life. As a result, Jack is incredibly protective over his story and its hero, Roger Skunk, and views Jo's attempts to change the structure of his story as more sinister attempts to control him as well.

"Should Wizard Hit Mommy" was written in 1959 when John Updike was married to his first wife Mary Pennington. The couple lived in Oxford, England, and had four children before they ultimately divorced. Their oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was herself four-years-old when the story was written. Therefore, it is easy to see the story as at least partly autobiographical, with "Jack" standing in for his author, John. Like Updike himself, Jack is concerned with crafting a compelling and dynamic story, and takes joy in his narrative ability. Jack is especially proud of certain literary and dramatic flairs within Roger's story even though they are lost on Jo. For example, Jo's suggestion that Roger should be a skunk "momentarily stir[s] Jack to creative enthusiasm." He seems to take genuine joy in the task of crafting a narrative. He also uses words that Jo does not know, like "crick" and "eventually," to showcase his own gift for language, and is annoyed when Jo interrupts and makes him "miss a beat in his narrative." He is proud of his ability as a dynamic storyteller. "The wizard's voice was one of Jack's own favorite effects," Updike explains; "he did it by scrunching up his face and somehow whining through his eyes." This joy shows that, for all his complaining, Jack is enriched by the story he's telling, embracing the ability to exist in an expansive world of his own creation instead of the cramped and unhappy world of his real life.

Jack takes pride in how he tells the Roger Skunk story because he is able to exert a control over Jo that he feels he no longer has over Clare or their life together. As such, he becomes disproportionately upset when Jo seems to not be engrossed in the tale he is spinning. For example, Jack snaps at Jo every time she attempts to take over telling any part of the story herself. "Now Jo daddy's telling the story," he chides her, "do you want to tell daddy the story?" Jack is also immensely pleased when his story causes Jo discomfort or trepidation, seeing it as his job as an author to tell her the truth, even though a father would traditionally seek to comfort his child. As such he stretches the story out, prolonging her suspense. Updike writes, "Jack felt the covers tug as her legs twitched tensely – he was telling her something true, something she must know – and had no wish to hurry on." Because of his level of personal investment in the story, Jack is also immensely frustrated whenever Jo is not enthralled by his tale, seeing it as a failure both as a storyteller

and as a father. "Jo made the crying face again, but this time without a hint of sincerity," he observes; "this annoyed Jack." He is also protective of the story because he is personally invested in Roger Skunk. He explains that Roger's bullying from the other animals reminded him of "certain humiliations of his own childhood."

Finally, despite griping about how stale the process of the naptime story has become for him, Jack still views this ritual as a chance to escape from his other obligations to Clare and to create a world in which he has complete control of the rules. Despite noting several times that he should be downstairs helping Clare, and Jo's obvious desire to not fall asleep for her nap, Jack continues to tell Jo the story, even taking opportunities to stretch out the moments of suspense or tension to extend his own creative enjoyment. When Jack finally does finish the story, Clare immediately chides him by telling him "that was a long story." This observation highlights that the story has been keeping Jack from something he needed to be doing, and that perhaps he has stretched out one of Jo's stories in a similar way before. When he finally does finish his story, he appears to be too exhausted by the sheer act of telling the story to help Clare with the task she has been waiting for him to complete. In this way, Jack indicates that his story was both as important and as emotionally draining as Clare's chores have been for her—because it allowed him an escape from his obligations toward his wife, which he must now face.

As Jack becomes further engrossed in his own telling of Roger Skunk's story, the story morphs into a microcosm of his own life. Roger becomes a stand-in for Jack, who trades ultimate happiness and self-fulfillment for the love and comfort of his family. However, despite Jack's personal investment in and control over Roger Skunk's story, the story is unable to capture the attention of its intended audience. Indeed, not only is Jo not calmed by the story, but she rejects its ending and demands a new one. This presents a layered crisis for Jack: not only does it remind him that he is bound by his obligations to his daughter, but it also calls into question his skill and control as a storyteller. However, Jo's reaction to the story ultimately serves to confront Jack with the very thing he had been hoping to avoid in telling his story—that is, the unhappiness of his family life and the violent animosity he feels toward his wife.



SYMBOLS

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



ROGER'S SMELL

In Jack's story, Roger Skunk is anxious to get rid of his smell so that the other animals will not run away

from him and will allow him to play. Jack feels personally invested in Roger's plight, having being bullied as a boy himself, but Roger's smell comes to mean more to Jack as the story progresses. Jack tries to show Jo that Roger cannot change his smell because it is something that belongs to him—something innately his own—and that, without it, he is no longer recognizable to the people around him. As Jack continues his story, it becomes clear that he views his duty to his wife Clare, Jo and their family in the same way: that familial obligation stays with him like Roger's unpleasant odor, something that he cannot shake, give up, or change without losing the people that he cares about. Therefore, when Jack tells Jo that Roger chooses to keep his skunk smell out of love for his mother, he is indicting that, like Roger, he remains committed to his family out of a similar sense of obligation, no matter how unhappy or ostracized they make him feel. This comparison casts familial duty in an inherently negative light—something that is as unpleasant, limiting, and alienating as a bad odor. Jo's reaction to Roger Skunk's smell shows that a sense of duty and self-sacrifice is something that comes with old age, since she is horrified that Roger is choosing to sacrifice being able to play with the other animals to please his mother. However, that Jack himself feels trapped in his life shows that even some adults never fully come to terms with the feeling of having made sacrifices out of a sense of duty to others.



THE HOUSE

Jack's story is punctuated repeatedly with the sound of his wife, Clare moving furniture as she repaints the living room downstairs. No matter how much Jack attempts to prolong and expand his story, the sound reminds him that he should be downstairs helping his wife work. At the very end of the story, Jack joins Clare in the living room, where, looking at the wooden molding all around them, he feels as though he were in a cage. In this way, everything about the home he lives in—from the ornamental details of the architecture right down to the furniture and the living room's fresh coat of paint—symbolize how stale and constrictive his life has become. When Jack looks at his home, he sees only the obligations, chores and marriage that are keeping him tied down. Clare is repainting the living room to prepare for the arrival of the couple's third child, so in addition to representing a physical chore that needs completing, the sound of moving furniture that makes up the story's background "soundtrack" represents the expansion of Jack's family and the new era of his life that is dawning, whether or not he is ready for it. Therefore, when Jack finally finishes telling Jo her story and comes downstairs to see Clare repainting, he is no longer able to mask feelings of resentment, depression and isolation towards his wife and the life that they are living. The house itself symbolizes the ways in which he feels "caged" by his life.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* published in 1962.

"Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" Quotes

●● The little girl (not so little anymore; the bumps her feet made under the covers were halfway down the bed, their big double bed that they let her be in for naps and when she was sick) had at last arranged herself, and from the way her fat face deep in the pillow shone in the sunlight sifting through the drawn shades, it did not seem fantastic that something magic would occur, and she would take her nap like an infant of two.

Related Characters: Jack, Jo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75


Explanation and Analysis

As Jo settles in for her naptime story, her father Jack notices that she is getting much taller. As she ages, Jo has not only become less prone to taking naps, but also increasingly disenchanted with the story of Roger Creature that her father continues to tell her. Jack is consistently preoccupied with pointing out evidence of Jo's physical growth as a reminder that, unlike her two-year-old brother who is happily asleep, Jo is growing into a young woman who will soon have ideas and opinions that Jack does not have control over. This will mean an extension of the familial duties that he already finds tiring and limiting. In addition, Jack's seemingly offhanded reference to Jo's "fat" face signals that Jack is also, on some level, repulsed by his daughter's body, which is likely an indication that his latent misogyny and distrust of women manifests towards Clare and Jo in similar ways, despite his best efforts to hide it.

●● Sitting on the bed beside her, Jack felt the covers tug as her legs switched tensely. He was pleased with this moment—he was telling her something true, something she must know—and had no wish to hurry on. But downstairs a chair scraped, and he realized he must get down to help Clare paint the living room woodwork.

Related Characters: Clare, Jo, Jack

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Jack is content when Jo seems uncomfortable during the Roger Skunk story. As a storyteller, Jack relishes the ability to impact his young daughter, controlling what she views as “true” and all that she “must know.” Jack values his control over Jo’s worldview because he feels so little control in his own life, especially since he is in a marriage in which he views his wife to be constantly undermining him. In addition, by forcing Jo to face an unpleasant reality, Jack believes himself to be teaching her a life lesson about facing the same kinds of unpleasant realities that he feels adult life to be full of. Indeed, Jack’s observation about the living room furniture suggests that Jack is using the story to ignore an important reality of his own life: his responsibility to his wife to prepare for the arrival of a new child.

“Are magic spells *real*?” This was a new phase, just this last month, a reality phase. When he told her spiders eat bugs, she turned to her mother and asked, “Do they *really*?” and when Clare told her God was in the sky and all around them, she turned to her father, and insisted, with a sly yet eager smile, “Is He *really*?”

Related Characters: Jo (speaker), The Wizard, Jack

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack explains to Jo that the Wizard performs a magic spell on Roger Skunk to make his bad smell disappear, Jo immediately questions the validity of his statement. Jo’s “reality phase” is a natural part of growing up, but for Jack, her questioning is unwelcome. First of all, Jack views Jo’s constant questions as attempts to undermine his knowledge and (in the case of the story) narrative ability. Jack views story time as one of the few moments in which he is not consistently contradicted, but Jo’s inquisitiveness signals that this may be coming to an end. In addition, Jack uses story time as a way to escape from his own stifling reality into a more innocent and childlike world of his own

creation. When Jo insists on knowing whether wizards are real or not, she is therefore not only contradicting Jack, but also bringing the constraints of reality and truth into a story that he has purposefully (and necessarily) made fantastical.

“The wizard’s voice was one of Jack’s own favorite effects; he did it by scrunching up his face and somehow whining through his eyes, which felt for the interval rheumy. He felt being an old man suited him.”

Related Characters: The Wizard, Jo, Jack

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Despite insisting that he finds the story time ritual to be tiring and unpleasant, Jack still relishes certain aspects of the process, especially doing impressions of some of the characters for Jo. In describing the delight he finds in doing the Wizard’s voice, Jack indicates that he uses story time as a personal escape as much as a way to get his daughter to go to sleep. For Jack, it is a time to indulge his inner childhood innocence and take pride in crafting a story that is dynamic and engaging for Jo in the process. In addition, the observation that “being an old man suited him” proves that Jack views himself to be like an old man already: tired, listless, and uninspired. This quality is largely due to the constraints of his unhappy marriage to Clare.

“He paused as a rapt expression widened out from his daughter’s nostrils, forcing her eyebrows up and her lower lip down in a wide noiseless grin, an expression in which Jack was startled to recognize his wife feigning pleasure at cocktail parties.”

Related Characters: Jo, Jack

Page Number: 78



Explanation and Analysis

When Jack recites the Wizard’s magic spell to Jo, he is shocked to notice that her expression of excitement and apprehension looks just like Clare’s when she is pretending to be interested at social functions. This observation suggests that, as Jo ages, Jack is having a harder time distinguishing between the two women in his life. As a

result, Jack's immense anger and resentment towards his wife colors everything he does and makes it impossible for him to view Jo's behavior (despite its innocence) as anything other than pointedly antagonistic. This generally antagonistic attitude towards Jo and Clare illustrates Jack's fundamental mistrust of women; he views the entire gender to be insincere, like Clare's patented expression. This also proves that Jack views both Clare and Jo as women that seek to undermine him, despite their differences in age and motivation.

☞ Jack didn't like women when they took anything for granted; he liked them apprehensive, hanging on his words.

Related Characters: Jack

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80


Explanation and Analysis

When Jo begins to fidget during his story, Jack takes it as a sign that she is losing interest, assuming that she already knows how the story will end. Though Jo's loss of interest is merely the hallmark of a small child, Jack views it as a tactic designed to undermine his authority. His observation that he liked women to be "apprehensive" around him suggests a deep resentment towards (and even hatred for) women. For Jack, making women uncomfortable is the best way that he believes he can maintain control over them. Coupled with his pleasure at seeing Jo uncomfortable during the Roger Skunk story, this observation suggests that Jack feels positively about making women feel uncomfortable or even unhappy as it restores his own primacy and sense of virility. This observation has troubling implications for the end of the story, in which Jo suggest that physical violence is the only way to punish a "bad mommy," suggesting that in addition to his clear distrust and anger towards women, Jack might be seeking to demonstrate his power over Clare through physical violence as well.

☞ "No," Jo said, and put her hand out to touch his lips, yet even in her agitation did not quite dare to stop the source of truth.

Related Characters: Jo (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80


Explanation and Analysis

In an effort to regain control over the narrative (and to make Jo apprehensive again), Jack changes the structure of his Roger story. He explains to Jo that Roger's mother was angry when he returned and no longer smelled like a skunk was supposed to. The revision has the desired effect. Jo is stunned, unable to understand why Roger's mother would not want her son to be happy and accepted by his peers. By changing the story, Jack wants to once again teach her a grownup lesson: that sometimes one must prioritize their duty to their family over their individual desires, much as he has to support his own family. The lesson is lost on Jo who, at four-years-old, is only able to think about herself and her own desires. In addition, Jack's observation that his own lips are "the source of truth" suggests that, once again, Jack is using his position as storyteller to exercise control over Jo, breaking through her innocent conception of the world and telling her an inalterable truth even though it makes her unhappy and is unpleasant to hear.

☞ "That was a stupid mommy."

Related Characters: Roger's Mother, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack tells Jo that Roger Skunk's mother hit the Wizard over the head and insisted that he give Roger back his old smell, Jo is beside herself. For her, Roger Skunk's mother is the clear antagonist because she does not allow Roger to gain the acceptance of his peers, dooming him instead to spend life smelly and as an outcast. However, the severity of her response and her immediate assertion that Roger's mother is "stupid" for her decision suggests that Jo might be unconsciously projecting her parents' fractured relationship onto her understanding of the story. "Stupid" is a relatively severe word for a four-year-old to use, and,

given Jack's previous admissions of ways that he finds women to be false and tiresome, it is easy to assume that it may be a word that she has heard him use to describe her own mother in the past. In this way, despite Jack's clear attempts to keep the burdens of his own reality out of story time, his fractured relationship is having unknown and immensurable consequences on his young daughter.

“Tomorrow, I want you to tell me the story that that wizard took that magic wand and hit that mommy”—her plump arms chopped fiercely—“right over the head.”

Related Characters: Jo (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis


When Jack explains to Jo that the Wizard heeded Roger's mother's wishes and returned Roger to his unpleasant scent, Jo issues Jack an ultimatum, asking for a follow-up story the next day in which the Wizard refuses the order and instead hits Roger's mother. By presenting her father with this ultimatum, Jo alters the rules of her relationship with Jack by proving that she not only has full capacity to understand and refute his ideas, but also the ability to tell a new and better story herself. Therefore, as Jack is no longer able to exert total control over story time, it will become just like the other elements of his life in which he struggles to maintain the direction in his personal narrative.

Jo views Roger's mother as the villain in the story and therefore believes that her punishment would constitute a just and happy ending. However, her suggestion that Roger's Mother should be punished with violence for her transgression is just a further indication that Jack has likely not been keeping his deep resentment for Clare well hidden, and that his anger may even have transitioned into

physical violence, which Jo is processing through the medium of the story.

The woodwork, a cage of moldings and rails and baseboards all around them, was half old tan and half new ivory and he felt caught in an ugly middle position, and though he as well felt his wife's presence in the cage with him, he did not want to speak with her, work with her, touch her, anything.

Related Characters: Clare, Jack

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When Jack is finished telling Jo her story, he is finally able to come downstairs and help his wife. When he arrives, however, he is immediately too fatigued and disheartened from story time to help her, and just sits watching her work instead. Looking at the living room around him, which is in the process of changing color, Jack notes that he is stuck in an emotional limbo, between the present reality of a life that he finds unfulfilling and the future promise of a new child and more responsibilities tying him down. Without the medium of the Roger Skunk story to filter it through, Jack's anger and resentment towards Clare is revealed to be complete and paralyzing, as she is someone he has no desire to speak or work with. In addition, Jack views the very molding of his house to be his personal prison, suggesting that it is the process of domesticity and his relationship with and obligation to his family that Jack feels trapped by. Importantly however, instead of viewing Clare as a partner who is equally involved in their family life and therefore equally restrained by it, Jack's unwillingness to engage with her suggests that, in many ways he views Clare as the cause of his unhappiness, blaming her instead of helping her, and viewing her as his captor instead of partner in confinement



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.

“SHOULD WIZARD HIT MOMMY?”

Every evening and before her Saturday naps, Jack tells his daughter Jo a bedtime story. The ritual has been going on since Jo was two, and now that she is four-years-old Jack is running out of ideas and Jo is losing interest. The stories always follow a basic pattern, concerning an animal named Roger who has a problem. Roger goes to the wise owl, who in turn sends him to the wizard who performs a spell and fixes the problem and makes Roger very happy. Roger then plays with the other little animal and gets home in time to hear his daddy come home on the train for dinner.

Jack is especially tired of the story time ritual because he has run out of ideas for stories and Jo never falls asleep in naps anymore. Indeed, Jo is growing taller by the day and Jack notes that her legs now stretch halfway down his bed as she snuggles in for her story. Her two-year-old brother Bobby is already asleep.

Jo explains that she wants the story to be about Roger Skunk today, which leads Jack to assume that she must be talking about skunks in school. Having a new animal for the story ignites Jack's creativity. He begins the story by explaining that Roger was a skunk who **smelled** so bad that none of the other animals wanted to play with him. This causes Jack to think back to times that he was bullied as a child.

Jo is upset over Roger Skunk's problem, and she begs Jack (and Roger) to go see the Owl for advice. Jack is pleased that the story is making Jo so anxious and he wants to build the suspense, but he hears the sound of **furniture** moving downstairs and remembers that he is supposed to be helping his wife, Clare, repaint the wood in their living room.

Jack continues the story. He explains that Roger goes to the owl and asks him for advice, since all of the other animals run away from him because of his **smell**. Before Jack can continue, Jo interjects that Roger should go see the wizard. Jack scolds Jo for interrupting, and asks her if she would like to tell the story herself. Jo says that she will allow him to tell the story if he tells it “out of his head.”

Jack is tired of his bedtime story ritual with Jo for two distinct reasons. First, it is an obligation to his children which, like most of his familial obligations, he finds increasingly tiring. Second, he has run out of interesting story ideas and is stuck recycling the same plot points, which is torturous for someone who enjoys telling stories. Additionally, Jack's story form likely mimics his own domestic arrangement, in which Jo is home all day with Clare until he comes home on the train for dinner.



Jack is preoccupied with pointing out emblems of his daughter's growth because it indicates that she is moving away from the unchallenging innocence of her baby brother, towards consciousness and rebellion.



By suggesting Roger be a skunk, Jo is bringing outside knowledge into the story that Jack cannot control. He is happy for this because it gives him new fodder as a storyteller, allowing Roger to become a personal character for Jack, who uses memories of his own to craft a narrative about being ostracized in the same way he currently feels in his marriage.



Jo feels for Roger skunk because, as a child, she is also concerned about being accepted by her peers. Jack is happy, in turn, because Jo's discomfort indicates that he has her attention and is in control of the story. He also uses the story to ignore his responsibilities to Clare, although his comment suggests that he is aware that he is dodging his duties.



Jo's interjection suggests that she has learned the structure of Jack's story and is able to tell it herself. For Jack, this represents a reversal in their power dynamic: Jo is no longer content blindly accepting everything he says. It also irks him as a storyteller to have his flow interrupted by her questions.



Jack concedes to Jo, telling her that Roger does indeed pay a visit to the wizard. Jo is still unsatisfied, and she asks her father whether magic spells are real. Jack notes that Jo is in a reality phase, constantly questioning facts that her parents tell her and asking whether they are real. Annoyed, Jack responds that magic spells are real in stories.

Jack continues the story, explaining that Roger Skunk journeyed through the woods to visit the wizard's house. Jack does an impression of the old wizard, which is his favorite part of the story. This makes Jo very happy, as well.

Roger explains to the wizard that all the other animals run away from him because he **smells**. The wizard invites Roger inside his dusty home. Jack notes that the wizard's house is very messy because he is a very old man and does not have a cleaning lady. Upon hearing that the wizard is old, Jo asks if he is going to die. Jack explains that wizards don't die.

Jack explains that Roger decided he wanted to **smell** like roses and that the wizard did a spell to make it possible. When he recites the spell for Jo, Jack notices that her expression of delight reminds him surprisingly of his wife's expression when she is pretending to be enjoying herself at a cocktail party.

Jack explains that the wizard asks Roger for four pennies as payment for the spell. However, Jack misspeaks and says "Roger Fish" instead of "Roger Skunk." Jo is upset by the mistake, even as she does not seem to be particularly engaged in the story. Jo's lack of sincere engagement with the story annoys Jack, since he is telling the story for his daughter's benefit. Downstairs, Jack hears Clare moving more **furniture**. He notes that she should not be moving heavy things, as she is six months pregnant with their third child.

Jack attempts to speed the story up. He explains that Roger returned to his friends who were now happy to play with him since he **smelled** like roses. The animals played until it was dark and then went home to their mothers. At this point, Jack notices that Jo is no longer listening to him, but fidgeting and looking out the window as if the story was over. Jack explains that this aggravates him because he doesn't like it when women take things for granted, preferring to keep them apprehensive and desperate to hear what he has to say next.

In addition to questioning his authority, Jo's insistence on reality upsets Jack because he uses his stories as a way to escape from reality and reconnect with his own childlike innocence instead of the duty and drudgery of his life.



Jack's excitement when performing his wizard impression shows that, despite finding story time monotonous, Jack also enjoys that it allows him to behave like a child and be freed from reality.



Jo's question about the wizard is another indication of her "reality phase." It also relates to the theme of growing up because it indicates that, despite Jack's best efforts and impressions, Jo is not enthralled by the story and would rather be in control of the narrative herself.



Jack is particularly angered by Jo's lack of interest because it reminds him of the ways Clare also undermines and dismisses him. Indeed, as Jo grows up to behave (and look) more like Clare, Jack is unable to separate them in his mind, viewing them both as women who seek to undermine him.



In addition to questioning his authority, Jo's lack of engagement with Roger's story takes Jack's limited enjoyment out of the task and turns it back into one of his stifling familial duties. Clare is repainting furniture to prepare for the arrival of their third child, so for Jack, the sound is not only a reminder of worse chores to come, but also of the pressures of an expanding family that he already feels constrained by.



Jack's observation about uninterested women is another example of the ways in which his strained relationship with Clare transfers to how he views his daughter's behavior. The sweeping generalization also indicates that Jack views Clare (and women more generally) as seeking to undermine and infantilize him. The desire to "keep women apprehensive" is therefore overtly misogynistic, as it suggests that making women uncomfortable is the only way Jack feels he can reclaim power from them.



In an effort to regain Jo's attention, Jack throws a wrench in his classic story. Jack tells Jo that when Roger gets home to his mother, she is repulsed by his scent and demands that he go back to the wizard and get changed back. Jo is horrified with the twist, since Roger's old **smell** made the other animals run away. However, Jack persists. He explains that Roger's mother tells him that he smelled the way a skunk was supposed to smell. The two go back to the wizard and Roger Skunk's mother hits the wizard on the head.

Jo does not accept this change in the story. She demands that the wizard refuse to change Roger back and instead hit his mother on the head himself. Sensing her agitation, Jack explains that the wizard did in fact change Roger back, and Roger and his mother got home just in time for Roger's father to come home from work. The family then ate a big dinner and went to sleep. Jack explains that when Roger's mother went to kiss him goodnight he **smelled** like a skunk again and she was very happy.

Jo senses a flaw in Jack's story: if Roger smells like a skunk again then he will continue to make the other animals run away. Jack assures Jo that eventually (a word Jo does not recognize) the other animals got used to Roger's **smell** and no longer ran away.

Jo says, "That was a stupid mommy" for making Roger change his **scent** back. With "rare emphasis," surprising even himself, Jack asserts that it was *not* stupid. He thinks that Jo notices the severity of his reaction and understands that he must be "defending his own mother to her, or something as odd." Jack urges Jo to sleep one final time and makes his way to the door.

Before Jack can leave, Jo stops him and explains that she wants a story the next day in which the wizard hits Roger's mother on the head instead of the other way around. Unsettled, Jack explains that the point of the story is that Roger loves his mother more than he requires the acceptance of the other animals, and is therefore happy with his smell. Jo does not accept this ending and demands that the next story involve Roger's mother being hit by the wizard.

Driven by the desire to make Jo unhappy, and to therefore regain control of his narrative in ways that he cannot control his life, Jack changes his classic story form in an effort to teach Jo a lesson about duty and responsibility. Instead of allowing Roger to be free of the burden of his scent, Jack explains that Roger gave his chance at full acceptance up out of a duty to his mother, much in the same way that Jack feels his family life is constraining his freedom.



Too young to have a concept of duty, Jo does not accept Jack's story and views Roger's mother as the villain for refusing to allow Roger to have the acceptance of his peers. Therefore, Jo believes that Roger's mother should be punished for her transgressions.



Jo and Jack's fundamental disagreement at the end of the story reveals that, as a child, Jo feels a duty only to herself and therefore cannot understand why Roger would compromise his happiness for his mother's.



Jo's shocking pronouncement that the wizard should hit Roger's mother to punish her suggests that Jack's resentment towards his wife is not staying well-hidden, and is in fact subconsciously influencing Jo's life, even during story time which is supposed to be both Jo and Jack's reprieve from reality. In addition, the suggestion of physical violence against a "stupid mommy" suggests that Jack may be physically abusive towards Clare.



Jo's ultimatum about Roger's story signals to Jack that he is no longer able to control his daughter's opinions and that she will soon begin contradicting him like Clare does. For Jo, however, her insistence that Roger's mother be punished is just a further indication that she is using story time to process a real element of her family dynamic: her parents' unhappy and potentially violent relationship.



Jack does not give Jo a definitive answer, and he goes downstairs to finally help Clare with the **furniture**. She is halfway through changing the paint color in the living room. When she notices Jack, Clare says that he told a particularly long story. Jack responds, “The poor kid.” Jack is too drained from telling Roger’s story to help paint, and instead he sits down heavily and watches his wife at work.

Jack notices that the wood is half its old tan color and half a new white color, and that he himself feels equally caught in a sort of limbo. Jack explains that the house’s **woodwork**—“moldings and rails and baseboards”—feels like a cage surrounding him, and that although he knows Clare is in the cage with him, he has no desire to make any kind of connection with her.

When Jack finally does interact with Clare, he is listless and depressed. He notes that the first thing Clare does is to chide him for the length of his story, indicating that he believes their relationship to be fundamentally hostile. In addition, despite explaining multiple times that he needs to help Clare paint, he is ultimately too tired to do so, choosing instead to mourn the fatiguing nature of his duties to his family.



Like the woodwork in his living room, Jack feels caught in a liminal space, between his present unhappiness and resentment in an unfulfilling marriage and the future promise of more children and more confining responsibilities. As Clare paints, she is also building the cage around him. While he understands that she is also limited by their life together, he sees her primarily as his tormenter and not his ally.





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