John Wade A Character Study–In The Lake Of The Woods Essay, Research Paper

John Wade:

A Character Study

John Wade is by far the most intricate and perplexing character examined throughout the novel In The Lake Of the Woods. His character hinges on the brink of order and chaos; on one hand, he is defined as a man who is obsessed with controlling the events and people around him. It is this obsession with control and order that lies alongside the central idea of the novel; that John Wade does not really know what happened to his wife. His blackouts and tendency towards spurts of violence highlight the chaos that lies beneath the surface of his life. The image of the mirrors demonstrate this aspects of John’s life; the mirrors represent both his attempt to control his world as well as a sanctuary from the reality of his helplessness.

The source of John’s Wade’s complexity can be traced to his childhood. As a child John tries desperately to win his father’s affection; Unfortunately, as is evident, John’s alcoholic father seems to prefer a different sort of child, more simple and typically American. Subsequently John -through his uniqueness- fails to satisfy his father. John’s father teases and ridicules him throughout his childhood. John’s mother sees this as the beginning of his need to escape from reality, the need to take on a different persona:

John had all kinds of different names. I remember his father used to call him Little Merlin or Little Houdini, and that Jiggling John one. Maybe he got used to it. Maybe he felt- maybe it sort of helped to call himself Sorcerer. I hope so. (p268)

Ultimately, John’s feelings of helplessness lead to a hunger for control. As a youngster, John is presented to the reader as a would-be magician who tries desperately to achieve the greatest trick of all – gaining his father’s love. At the same time, the magic helps John to take control of his life in times of helplessness.

His father’s death accentuates his reliance on magic to the point where John begins to do the tricks “in his mind”(p31)

Long ago, as a kid, he’d learned the secret of making his mind into a blackboard. Erase the bad stuff. Draw in pretty pictures. (p135)

The need for love and control is carried over into his adulthood and later, his relationship with Kathy. He spies on her and obsesses about losing her. John genuinely loves Kathy, but the images he uses to represent this is significant:

He compared their love to a pair of snakes he’s seen along a trail near Pinkville, each snake eating the other’s tail, a bizarre circle of appetites that brought the heads closer and closer…”That’s how our love feels”. (p61)

This image, along with his desire to “control the miracle of her breathing”(p76) and “crawl inside her belly”(p 71) indicates a love that is both obsessive and ultimately destructive. His need to control and ‘consume’ Kathy dictates the way we view his actions as the book progresses.

In Vietnam, John takes the anonymous role of Sorcerer-someone who is respected, powerful and fearless. Hence, John Wayne distances himself from relationships and from the harsh realities of the war. It is here that the images of the mirrors, brought into existence from childhood, come into their own; the horrors of the war can be temporarily held at bay. Subsequently, in periods of chaos and violence, Wade’s need for outer order and secrecy increases. This source of mental refuge gives Wade a distinct advantage over the other soldiers. At Lake of the Woods, years later, John is confronted by what his life has been and the three most traumatic incidents merge in his dream. (quote on page 42 summarises this.)

The ‘post-traumatic stress’ caused by his time in Vietnam is only a part of the pattern of John’s life, it is of a piece with his other experiences. His other experiences shape his character so that aspects of Vietnam seem like home:

Sorcerer was in his element. It was a place with secret trap doors and tunnels and underground chambers a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else the war itself was a mystery, secrets were everywhere. (p72-73)

John’s need to control reality results in his complete retreat from it. He develops an external imagery and history, a mask shown to the world that bears no relation to inner truth. He ‘moved with determination across the surface of his life’.(p76) hence, by relying on secrecy, Wade loses touch with himself. His overbearing control of the external results in a deep inner chaos and loss of identity.

Wade felt an estrangement from the actuality of the world, its basic nowness , and in the end, all he could conjure up was an image of illusion itself, pure reflection, a head full of mirrors. (p280)

The mirrors that John constructs in his head are coping mechanisms and symbols of order and power – they are magic, they block out unbearable information and construct alternative realities. Realistically, the mirrors hint to insanity and chaos: Once the magic of the mirrors fades, what is left is a fantasy world in which Wade finds himself, permanently.

The election was only part of it. There was also those mirrors in his head. An electric buzz, the chemistry inside of him, the hum of the lake in the woods. He felt the pinch of depravity. (p49)

His blackouts testify to time spent in the mirror world whilst committing who knows what crimes Wade, in constructing an unreal version of his life, becomes alienated from his own consciousness. He no longer controls or remembers his actions. Subsequently the text focuses on how and why Wade attempts to re-invent the truth about himself and Kathy.

John Wade searches for love throughout his life. He goes to war for love, he becomes a politician for love, he hides things from Kathy to preserve their love. However, in the end, Wade realises that it is the secrecy and lies that are the most damaging, preventing any real sort of love:

For his entire life, it seemed that there had been the terror of discovery he had tricked up his own life. Only for love, only to be loved. (p246)

At the end of the text, the ‘author’ asks us to look at John Wade’s actions in the context of his background.

Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man? That he was innocent of everything except his life? Could the truth be so simple? So terrible?(p306)

John Wade is essentially a tragic character corrupted by forces within himself. A piteous protagonist who – plagued by circumstance – received more than he ever deserved.