SHOULD WIZARD HIT MOMMY?

John Hoyer Updike

Theme

The story deals with child innocence and adult complexes. The story is a narrative within a narrative and involves issues such as parental authority and parental Prejudices foisted on children. A subtheme of the story is that mothers are always right which directly relates to Jack's own experiences with his mother.

Notes:

In the story," Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" the writer, John Updike, examines the issues of parenting and the flaws that inadvertently creep in. The adult tendency to quell the questioning mind of a child and also the intrusion of the beliefs held by adults to represent the only valid viewpoint, are areas that find mention in the simple yet powerful story.

Jo, the four year old daughter of Jack, has been subjected to a ritual of bedtime story telling by her father ever since she was two years of age. As the story unfolds it is revealed that this exercise has lost its appeal due to its repetitive nature as each new story has a slight variation of a basic tale. It follows a simple unchanging plot in which the various characters all bear the name of Roger and the ending is predictable.

Jack prides himself on what he thinks of as his ingenuity, and is especially proud of his ability to enact the role of the old wizard, and integral part of each story, changing his voice and screwing

up his eyes. Jack too has begun to tire of this chore and cannot help thinking that it was so much better when Jo was smaller and would go to sleep sooner. He thinks of her two year old brother, Bobby, peacefully asleep and is almost pleased that Jo has requested that the character for that night's story should be Roger Skunk., a new character. His creativity is momentarily stirred and he embarks on his story, thought following the same basic plot that has been used each night, for the past two years.

The story of smelly Skunk who smelt so bad that he did not have any friends, follows the same course except that in mentioning this fact, Jack is reminded of his own childhood and its humiliation and begins to feel that he is actually telling Jo something is true and thus is in no hurry to go faster. When Jo interrupts, he is irritated by her and is even more so when she asks whether magic spells are real. He is reminded that of later she has been asking many questions.

This wonderful evidence of Jo's inquisitive progressing mind and intellect completely escapes Jack, so intent on getting on with the story as planned by him. His answers to her questions are short and peremptory and he fails to notice that her question about whether the old wizard could die might be a sign of an inner fear. He continues with the story and so uninvolved is he in the story that Jo has to remind him that he has referred to Roger Skunk as Roger Fish.

It comes as rude shock to Jack to discover that though Jo is exhibiting the desired response to each fragment of the story, the response is insincere and even reminds him of his wife pretending pleasure at a cocktail party. As the story that

Jack is narrating comes to an end, he notices that Jo is expecting it to end this way and this annoys him for some inexplicable reason. He cannot bear it when women take things for granted and he decides to continue with the story giving it a twist. In his story the wizard has changed Skunk so that he smelt of roses but mother Skunk disapproved of this and hit the wizard with her umbrella making him change Skunk back to his old stinking self.

The end of story does not appeal to Jo who wants the wizard to hit mommy, but Jack tells her that mommy knows what is best for her child. It is evident that the story violates Jo's sense of fairness for why Roger Skunk should not smell of roses and thus have more friends. It is also apparent that in a way Jo's constant question and her non acceptance of Jacks' ending of the story appears to be a threat to his authority, for do not adults know best!

Jack feels threatened by Jo's attitude and when he finds that she is restless after he has come downstairs, he uses the ultimate weapon of adult authority-does she want him to spank her, he asks. Jack finds his wife painting the chair downstairs. She is expecting their third child and is wearing his shirt over her maternity dress. He notices that half the chair is still the old dirty color while the other half is the color of ivory. He finds himself caught somewhere in an ugly middle position.

This is perhaps an indication of the confusion that Jo's questioning has caused. The idea is not only shocking but also quite unacceptable to him. The reader does get the distinct impression that Jack is not used to his authority being questioned by anyone and least of all a little child. He finds it hard to come to terms with the fact that Jo no longer accepts what he says and is not afraid to assert her opinion.

The fact that she insists on his changing the ending of the story the following night also indicated that she has lost faith in adult wisdom and has a mind of her own, something that Jack cannot understand or accept. The writer brings into focus the impatience and insensitivity that adults displays in their dealing with children and the intolerance they exhibit if they feel that their authority is being questioned.

He also highlights the adult habit of imposing their opinion on children and that of discouraging any queries. So caught up are adults in the web of life that they lose their sense of perception which is so sharp in children. Also, the adult viewpoint is most often colored by the intrusive hues of their various experiences in life.

SOLVED SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS
1. What was usually the basic storyline of the tale that Jack told Jo almost daily?

Ans. The stories that Jack used to tell Joe were the slight variation of the basic tale about a small creature usually named Roger. Roger would go to the wise owl whenever in trouble.

The wise owl would ask him to go to the wizard who would finally solve Roger's problem.

2. Describe the wizard's room.

Ans. The wizard's room is a white house over the crick. Inside it are all magic things all jumbled together in a big dusty heap as the wizard did not have any cleaning lady.

3. How did Roger Skunk's mommy react when he smelling 'roses' went home?

Ans. When Roger Skunk smelling 'roses' reached home his mommy asked what was that awful smell. Roger Skunk replied that the wizard had made him smell like that. She got angry and with Roger went to the wizard and hit his head with an umbrella.

4. How did Jo react to Jack's storyline?

Ans. Jo did not agree with Jack's version of the story in which Roger Skunk's mommy hit that wizard right over his head for changing Roger Skunk's smell. Instead she wanted the wizard hit Skunk's mommy and did not change that little Skunk's smell back.

5. What does Jack actually want Jo to know and understand in the story?

Ans. Jack actually wants Jo to know and understand that parents always love their children as they are. Smelling good or bad is immaterial against the natural biological bond. But this thing is Jo's beyond understanding. Father has felt empty after two years of storytelling to Jo.

LONG ASNWER QUESTIONS

Q1. Jack is very influenced by his mother's upbringing. It is universally acknowledged that 'mother knows best'. Explain how placing trust in one's parents will be rewarding. Value points

➢ Multiple factors taken into consideration
➢ Parents / elders know better
➢ Age and experience favour accurate judgment
➢ Less likely to be swayed by peer pressure, fashion, trends etc.
➢ Interest of child will be close to heart
➢ Pressure / stress will be rightly handled

Q2. Jack wishes to help his wife but certain prejudice comes in the way of actually doing so. Analyse how preconceived notions about other people will often come in the way of evolving ourselves into better people. Value points:

➢ Help from others will not be forthcoming.
➢ Bias / prejudice will make one intolerant
➢ Fanatic opinions / beliefs not conducive to overall growth
➢ Multifaceted society
➢ Ideals of harmony and peace will be curtailed
➢ Workplaces, neighborhoods' and society at large will suffer.