

Initiation

Sylvia Plath (1952)

1. Plot

Initiation recounts the events of five days of “initiation antics” (143) which the protagonist—by name Millicent—has to go through. Sitting in a cellar with her hair sticky from crushed eggs Millicent weighs the pros and cons of joining the sorority. Finally she emerges from the darkness of the basement room realising that “her own private initiation had just begun” (147).

2. Characters

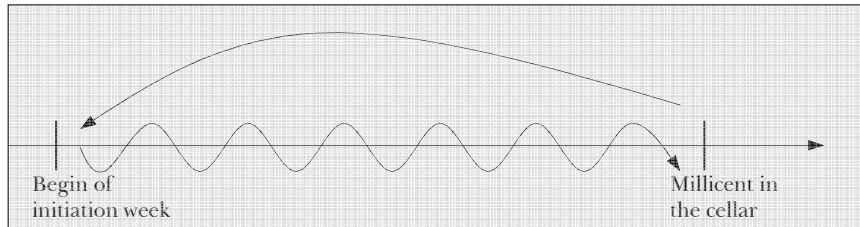
Millicent Arnold	the protagonist “plain, shy [...] a few years back” (138) She “had waited a long time for acceptance, longer than most.” (139)
Tracy	“If there is such a thing as a best friend, Tracy has been just that this last year.” (140) She “was just a bit <i>too</i> different” (140) “wearing knee socks to school, or carrying that old bookbag.” (141) “Tracy was understanding, as ever.” (143)
Louise “Lou” Fullerton	“another celebrity in high school, pretty and dark and Vice-President of the Student Council” (138) “had always before been very nice, very polite, friendlier than the rest” (139)
Betsy Johnson	“the vivacious blonde secretary of the sorority” (138)
Beverly “Bev” Mitchell	Millicent’s “big sister” (141) “she’s the toughest” (141) “her tone [was] almost malicious” (141)
Herb Dalton	“the good-looking basketball captain” (142) Millicent: “He is too princely, too dark” (143)
Mr Cranton	“the principal” (139)
a little man (on the bus)	“small and jolly, with a ruddy, wrinkled face” (144) “brown suit with the forest-green tie” (144) “like a gnome or a cheerful leprechaun” (144)
a madam (on the bus)	
a young businessman (on the bus)	
Liane Morris	“another of the girls being initiated” (145)
Liane’s sister	
the captain of the football team	

3. Setting

Millicent is locked up in the dim basement room of Betsy Johnson's house. It's Friday night in October and she can see the light of the full moon. She sits on a woodpile next to a furnace. The events during the preceding week take place at Lansing High School, on the way there, in a drugstore and on a bus.

4. Narrative Technique and Diction

The story is told by an omniscient third person narrative instance: "The basement room was dark and warm, like the inside of a sealed jar, Millicent thought, her eyes getting used to the strange dimness." (137) The events are recounted in retrospective (flashback).



Sylvia Plath's diction is largely straightforward but occasionally strongly lyrical and rich in rhetorical devices such as comparisons:

Simile

"The basement room was dark and warm, like the inside of a sealed jar" (137)

"The silence was soft with cobwebs" (137)

"air like honey" (139)

Alliteration

Her hair "was stiff and sticky". (137)

"a silence, a slight crunching sound" (137)

"wistfully watching the gay couples waltzing" (139)

"Millicent sipped her cold, sweet drink slowly, saving the ice cream to spoon up last." (140)

"mythological moors" (144)

"dipping and darting" (146)

Onomatopoeia

"crunching" (137)

"Fairy tale language"

"the grand finale" (137), "the trial by fire" (137), "a pavilion outside a dance floor" (139), "the golden interior" (139), air like honey" (139), "wistfully watching the gay couples waltzing" (139), never-ending music (139), "a week of fanfare and

merriment" (139), "her invitation to enter the ballroom" (139), "velvet skirts" (139), "silken trains" (139), "the disinherited princess" (139), "her rightful kingdom" (139), "taking orders [...] like a servant" (142), "to fend off a blow" (142), "[Herb] is too princely" (143), "I am much too vulnerable" (143), "miraculous" (143), "she caroled gaily" (143), "forest-green tie" (144), "a gnome" (144) "a cheerful leprechaun" (144), "Heather birds" (144), "mythological moors" (144), "her coronation as a princess" (146), "getting into the great hall, blazing with lights" (146), "the soft gloom" (146), "a melodic fluting, quite wild and sweet" (146), "the song of the heather birds" (146).

Antithesis

"The sparrows chirping in the gutters" (145)

"pale, gray-brown birds in a flock, one like the other, all exactly alike" (146)

"the heather birds. Swooping carefree over the moors, they would go singing and crying out across the great spaces of air, dipping and darting, strong and proud in their freedom and their sometime loneliness." (146)

5. Symbols, motifs, themes

Symbols

The "sealed jar" (137)

seclusion, loneliness

Birds

The "pale gray-brown" (146) sparrows compared to the "bright purple" (144) heather birds:

anonymity vs. individuality, originality versus uniformity, being imprisoned vs. being free. Note the emphasis on the bird's wild nature and the emphasis on their quick and sudden movements.

Themes

The exclusiveness of a group

"What girl at Lansing High would not want to be in her place now? [...] What girl would not want to be one of the elect?" (137-8)

"the magic circle" (138)

"a closely knit group" (139)

"the exclusive set at Lansing High" (139)

"undemocratic" (139)

"one of the elect" (139)

"a sort of exclusive social group" (145)

"it sure gives a girl prestige value" (145)

"one of the select flock" (146)

Constant change

"you'll change, [...]. Nothing ever stays the same. [...] How horrible it would be if one never changed [...] there was always the changing, the growing, the going on." (138) > coming of age, to become mature

Rebellion

“her revolt” (137)

“Worse than a loyalty test, this grilling over the coals. What’s it to prove anyway?” (141)

“an unpleasant anonymity” (141)

“a denial of individuality” (141)

“Rebellion” (141)

Insight

“Being mythological does wonders for one’s ego” (145)

“So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them. And really, you didn’t have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings.” (145)

“the searing period of the ego which could end in two kinds of victory” (146)

“This is it, all right. The worst part, the hardest part, the part of initiation that I figured out myself.” (146)

“And she knew that her own private initiation had just begun.” (147)

6. Text

Short story

7. Author

See biography

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Study questions

1. Why does Millicent want to join the sorority?
2. Why does Millicent change her mind?
3. Show how Millicent gradually changes her mind.
4. What is the function of the small man and the heather birds?
5. What are the heather birds juxtaposed with?
6. What is meant by her “private initiation”?
7. What are the two possible victories?
8. At the end of the story Millicent emerges from a darkened basement. What does it mean?

Plath, Sylvia, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, London, Faber and Faber, 1979, pp. 137-147.

Study Questions

1. Everybody would like to be part of this “exclusive social group” which “gives a girl prestige”.

2. The sorority and the girl’s regular meetings to entertain each other seem not to be a promising prospect. It is not worthwhile to leave Tracy on the outside. Moreover the initiation process and the membership of the sorority involve a loss of individuality.

3. Quotations to show Millicent’s development:

“What girl at Lansing High would not want to be in her place” (137)

“How horrible it would be if one never changed” (138)

“Millicent had waited a long time for acceptance” (139)

“Walking beside Louise on the way to the drugstore, Millicent felt a surge of pride” (140)

Louise Fullerton: “Some of them thought Tracy was just a bit *too* different.” (140)

“What’s it to prove anyway?” (141)

“It was almost malicious. And there was an unpleasant anonymity” (141)

“Being mythological does wonders for one’s ego.” (145)

“From that time on, initiations didn’t bother Millicent at all.” (145)

“You mean it’s just a sort of exclusive social group?” (145)

Liane Morris: “My sister started going steady with the captain of the football team after she got in.” (145)

“It was then that she made her decision” (146)

4. He symbolises individuality (his breakfast!) and originality (tasty eyebrows).

5. The heather birds form a strong contrast to the pale grey-brown birds (sparrows) (144-7)

6. The crucial moment is to deny membership to the sorority after five days of initiation.

7. She has got two options: either to become part of the “select flock” or to chose a different way “of getting into the great hall, blazing with lights, of people and life“, hence not to join the sorority after having successfully undergone the initiation process. (146)

8. It emphasises her psychological development. She has learned something, she has become more mature. The dark is the place to contemplate.