

Read HA 'PENNY by Alan Paton

QUESTIONS

- 1) Where does this story take place?
- 2) Why do some of the boys observe the narrator "obliquely and secretly"? How does the narrator put them at ease?
- 3) What makes Sunday a particularly lonely day for some of the boys, and how does the narrator compensate for this loneliness?
- 4) What specific detail of Ha'penny's story does not ring true to the narrator? What action does he take?
- 5) What is the name of the woman Ha'penny pretends is his mother? How does he describe her?
- 6) What motivates Ha'penny's "mother" to finally visit him? What is her response upon meeting him?
- 7) Describe the narrator's theories about the education and reform of troubled youngsters as expressed in the first paragraph of the story.
- 8) What question finally brings Ha'penny up short and precipitates the climax of the story?
- 9) Based on your knowledge of Paton's life, explain why he chose this setting for the story.
- 10) Why are the phrases, "though not in those words" and "though not in so many words", symbolic of the guilt the narrator feels?

ESSAY

Imagine that you are Paton and that you now recognize Ha'penny's deep emotional need. What actions can you take to help him?

ENGLISH LITERATURE WEEK EIGHT Mr. WIDELITZ

Literary Critique

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RETURN INFORMATION:

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Ha'penny

Alan Paton

FOCUS: CHARACTERIZATION; IRONY

Why would it have been appropriate to separate the younger boys from the older?

Why is it easier to control younger boys, according to the narrator?

How does the narrator know that his "authority was thus confirmed and strengthened"? Compare his words to those on this topic in the previous paragraph.

Why do the boys exhibit both "childish awareness and manly indifference" simultaneously?

Of the six hundred boys at the reformatory, about one hundred were from ten to fourteen years of age. My Department had from time to time expressed the intention of taking them away, and of establishing a special institution for them, more like an industrial school than a reformatory. This would have been a good thing, for their offences were very *trivial*, and they would have been better by themselves. Had such a school been established, I should have liked to have been Principal of it myself, for it would have been an easier job; small boys turn instinctively toward affection, and one controls them by it, naturally and easily.

Some of them, if I came near them, either on parade* or in school or at football, would observe me watchfully, not directly or fully, but *obliquely* and secretly; sometimes I would surprise them at it, and make some small sign of recognition, which would satisfy them so that they would cease to observe me, and would give their full attention to the event of the moment. But I knew that my authority was thus confirmed and strengthened.

These secret relations with them were a source of continuous pleasure to me. Had they been my own children, I would no doubt have given greater expression to it. But often I would move through the silent and orderly parade, and stand by one of them. He would look straight in front of him with a little frown of concentration that expressed both childish awareness and manly indifference to my

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on parade — standing outside at attention in an open area, waiting for roll call or for an important visitor.

nearness. Sometimes I would *tweak* his ear, and he would give me a brief smile of acknowledgement, or frown with still greater concentration. It was natural I suppose to confine these outward expressions to the very smallest, but they were taken as symbolic, and some older boys would observe them and take themselves to be included. It was a relief, when the reformatory was passing through times of *turbulence* and trouble, and when there was danger of *estrangement* between authority and boys, to make these simple and natural gestures, which were reassurances both to me and them that nothing important had changed.

What have we learned about the narrator?

On Sunday afternoons when I was on duty, I would take my car to the reformatory and watch the free boys* being signed out at the gate. This simple operation was also watched by many boys not free, who would tell each other "in so many weeks I'll be signed out myself." Amongst the watchers were always some of the small boys, and these I would take by turns in the car. We would go out to the Potchefstroom Road with its ceaseless stream of traffic, and to the Baragwanath crossroads, and come back by the Van Wyksrus road to the reformatory. I would talk to them about their families, their parents, their sisters and brothers, and I would pretend to know nothing of Durban, Port Elizabeth, Potchefstroom, and Clocolan,* and ask them if these places were bigger than Johannesburg.

What positive trait has the "free boy" policy engendered?

In what city is the reformatory located? How do we know?

One of the small boys was Ha'penny, and he was about twelve years old. He came from Bloemfontein* and was the biggest talker of them all. His mother worked in a white person's house, and he had two brothers and two sisters. His brothers were Richard and Dickie and his sisters Anna and Mina.

"Richard and Dickie," I asked.

"Yes, *meneer*."*

"In English," I said, "Richard and Dickie are the same name."

Dickie is often a nickname for Richard.

When we returned to the reformatory, I sent for Ha'penny's papers; there it was plainly set down, Ha'penny was a *waif*,

free boys — boys who are being released for the day

Durban ... Clocolan — cities in South Africa, all of which are less populated than Johannesburg.

Bloemfontein — a large city in South Africa.

meneer — (Afrikaans) sir.

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What is the significance of the words "naughty and uncontrollable"?

What does the "Letter Book" appear to be?

How does Ha'penny reveal his innermost nature?

Why does Ha'penny invent a family for himself?

How does the narrator rationalize his interest in Ha'penny?

Why does Betty Maarman refuse to answer Ha'penny's letters?

with no relatives at all. He had been taken in from one home to another, but he was naughty and uncontrollable, and eventually had taken to *pilfering* at the market.

I then sent for the Letter Book, and found that Ha'penny wrote regularly, or rather that others wrote for him till he could write himself, to Mrs. Betty Maarman, of 48 Vlak Street, Bloemfontein. But Mrs. Maarman had never once replied to him. When questioned, he had said, perhaps she is sick. I sat down and wrote at once to the Social Welfare Officer at Bloemfontein, asking him to investigate.

The next time I had Ha'penny out in the car, I questioned him again about his family. And he told me the same as before, his mother, Richard and Dickie, Anna and Mina. But he softened the "D" of "Dickie," so that it sounded now like Tickie.

"I thought you said Dickie," I said.

"I said Tickie," he said.

He watched me with concealed *apprehension*, and I came to the conclusion that this waif of Bloemfontein was a clever* boy, who had told me a story that was all imagination, and had changed one single letter of it to make it safe from any question. And I thought I understood it all too, that he was ashamed of being without a family, and had invented them all, so that no one might discover that he was fatherless and motherless, and that no one in the world cared whether he was alive or dead. This gave me a strong feeling for him, and I went out of my way to *manifest* toward him that fatherly care that the State, though not in those words, had *enjoined* upon my by giving me this job.

Then the letter came from the Social Welfare Officer in Bloemfontein, saying that Mrs. Betty Maarman of 48 Vlak Street was a real person, and that she had four children, Richard and Dickie, Anna and Mina, but that Ha'penny was no child of hers, and she knew him only as a *derelict* of the streets. She had never answered his letters, because he wrote to her as *mother*, and she was no mother of his, nor did she wish to play any such role. She was a decent woman, a faithful member of the church, and she had no thought of corrupting her family by letting them have anything to do with such a child.

clever — here, sly.

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But Ha'penny seemed to me anything but the usual *delinquent*, his desire to have a family was so strong, and his reformatory record was so blameless, and his anxiety to please and obey so great, that I began to feel a great duty towards him. Therefore I asked him about his "mother."

He could not speak enough of her, nor with too high praise. She was loving, honest, and strict. Her home was clean. She had affection for all her children. It was clear that the homeless child, even as he had attached himself to me, would have attached himself to her; he had observed her, even as he had observed me, but did not know the secret of how to open her heart, so that she would take him in, and save him from the lonely life that he led.

"Why did you steal when you had such a mother?" I asked.

He could not answer that; not all his brains nor his courage could find an answer to such a question, for he knew that with such a mother he would not have stolen at all.

"The boy's name is Dickie," I said, "not Tickie."

And then he knew the deception was revealed. Another boy might have said, "I told you it was Dickie," but he was too intelligent for that; he knew that if I had established that the boy's name was *Dickie*, I must have established other things too. I was shocked by the immediate and visible effect of my action. His whole brave assurance died within him, and he stood there exposed, not as a liar, but as a homeless child who had surrounded himself with mother, brothers, and sisters, who did not exist. I had shattered the very foundations of his pride, and his sense of human significance.

He fell sick at once, and the doctor said it was tuberculosis.* I wrote at once to Mrs. Maarman, telling her the whole story, of how this small boy had observed her, and had decided that she was the person he desired for his mother. But she wrote back saying that she could take no responsibility for him. For one thing, Ha'penny was a Mosuto,* and she was a coloured* woman; for another, she had never had a child in trouble, and how could she take such a boy?

tuberculosis — consumption; an infectious disease that affects the lungs.

Mosuto — a member of an African tribe.

coloured — (South African usage) a person of mixed race.

What is the initial result of the disclosure that the child's name is indeed Dickie?

What is the next result, according to the narrator?

What negative characteristics does Mrs. Maarman display?

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Why may Ha'penny have withdrawn from the world?

Tuberculosis is a strange thing; sometimes it manifests itself suddenly in the most unlikely host,* and swiftly sweeps to the end. Ha'penny withdrew himself from the world, from all Principals and mothers, and the doctor said there was little hope. In desperation I sent money for Mrs. Maarman to come.

What can we learn from the change in Mrs. Maarman?

She was a decent homely woman, and seeing that the situation was serious, she, without fuss or embarrassment, adopted Ha'penny for her own. The whole reformatory accepted her as his mother. She sat the whole day with him, and talked to him of Richard and Dickie, Anna and Mina, and how they were all waiting for him to come home. She poured out her affection on him, and had no fear of his sickness, nor did she allow it to prevent her from satisfying his hunger to be owned. She talked to him of what they would do when he came back, and how he would go to the school, and what they would buy for Guy Fawkes night.*

How does Mrs. Maarman attempt to instill hope in the fatally ill Ha'penny?

He in his turn gave his whole attention to her, and when I visited him he was grateful, but I had passed out of his world. I felt judged in that I had sensed only the existence and not the measure* of his desire. I wished I had done something sooner, more wise, more prodigal.*

Why does the narrator feel judged?

We buried him on the reformatory farm, and Mrs. Maarman said to me, "When you put up the cross, put he was my son."

"I'm ashamed," she said, "that I wouldn't take him."

"The sickness," I said, "the sickness would have come."

What has Betty Maarman realized?

"No," she said, shaking her head with certainty. "It wouldn't have come. And if it had come at home, it would have been different."

So she left for Bloemfontein, after her strange visit to the reformatory. And I was left too, with the resolve to be more prodigal in the task that the State, though not in so many words, had enjoined on me.

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host — here, the body in which the disease thrives.

Guy Fawkes night — November 5th, a day celebrated in England to commemorate the foiling of a plot by Guy Fawkes and others to blow up Parliament in 1605.

measure — here, extent.

prodigal — wasteful; recklessly extravagant; here, more generous of time and commitment.