

The Boy with the Missing Thumb

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From "Hook & Eye: Stories from the Margins"

Note: These are reflection notes, done by Teacher Jo (www.teacher-jo.com). You will find that there's a distinct lack of opinion and not that much annotation. This is because this collection was put together with the intention that readers develop their own meaning based on their own life experiences.

How then should you use these notes to help yourself?

Reflect on and answer all the questions I have listed.

When attempting to answer these questions, be as open-minded and honest as possible. Where your opinion is needed, try to answer those questions in the PEEL format. Have evidence and reason, and elaborate as if trying to explain it to someone else who doesn't understand. Pretend to persuade someone else to accept your opinion.

Good luck!

Teacher Jo

Scene Summary	Analysis & Reflection
<p>Gregory wakes up to find the thumb on his right hand missing.</p> <p>It is unbelievable and so he checks and double checks, trying to wake himself up completely.</p> <p>He finds himself alone at home and remembers that his parents are overseas on holiday.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the get-go, we get the sense that something isn't right. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It is unrealistic to wake up at home, remembering yesterday, with a missing thumb. ○ What's more, there are no fresh wounds – there is “a callused layer where his thumb had assumed a place of pride” – and there is no pain or tingle. ○ This surreal atmosphere should already give us a sense of foreboding that something is very wrong, even unrealistic. • With that in mind, when we re-read this section, we find our eyes drawn to his body's complaints: “His square jaws, heavy now with sagging fat, felt awfully stiff.” Might this be a sign of something being wrong? • Yet, the paragraphs end with his being annoyed (feelings), not because things are not playing out the way they should, but because he is worried that it might interfere with his gaming (ironic). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Very early on in the text, we are acquainted with the fact that he is very addicted to gaming, so much so that he is more upset with what not having his right thumb could do to his gaming experience than the fact that he has lost his right thumb overnight.
<p>Gregory reflects on his parents' travels around South East Asia, and doesn't understand the point of it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterisation: We are given hints that Gregory is quite solitary and quite intelligent too. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Solitary: He would rather stay in his room than to spend time with his family.

<p>He remembers a trip from long ago and how he was so bored, he had to feign sickness just to be left in the hotel room to play games.</p> <p>Before his parents left for their latest trip, his mother nagged at him about his gaming addiction. She threatened to take his games away if his grades do not improve, but he does not believe her threats.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Solitary: He thinks actually visiting temples is pointless and wonders why virtual temples have not yet been created, to meet the needs of devotees anytime, anywhere. However, his ideas all revolve around staying at home instead of interacting directly with the world, hinting at his solitary lifestyle, which is consistent with that of most addicted gamers. ○ Intelligent: He is quite IT-savvy. His idea about virtual temples is brilliant, if uninformed, as is his belief that Google Maps, with many of its features, is a good and cost-effective replacement for actual travel. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If we consider all the VR and AR solutions that have been created for the tourism industry because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be said that he has some innovative foresight. ● All of these conclusions about his character, however, forces us to question his reaction to his missing thumb. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ His response is underwhelming and shows a lack of concern that is incongruent with his implied intelligence. ○ This forces us to question: why is he behaving in this unexpected way?
<p>We learn part of the reason why it is so important to Gregory that he stays at home and plays his games instead of spending time with his family: he is desperate to beat Nick's high score.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Everything is shouting for Gregory's attention: his body, his missing thumb, his games. There is so much going on. What is he doing that he has a missing thumb and a full bladder? ● He reflects on how the human body is a wretched deal of inconvenience – again, this tells us that he isn't just some dumb kid who only knows how to play games. There is a level of intelligence.

However, before we can find out who this Nick is and why it is so important to outdo him, Gregory is once again distracted by his missing thumb. This doesn't last for long, though, as his bladder makes a grab for his attention.

Gregory considers a solution to this urination and defecation disruption.

It irks him that his real body is so demanding, whereas his virtual body was a killing machine that is unburdened by all the normal demands of a human body.

- “I could not have misplaced it, could I? Maybe I am dreaming.”
 - How can someone somewhat intelligent think that he might have misplaced his thumb? It is such a ludicrous idea and one not worth even considering.
 - Once again, we get a **sense of foreboding** that none of this is real – at least, not completely.
 - Later in the text, we see that he does eventually relieve himself, which tells us that he is probably not dreaming. But, if he is not dreaming and things are seemingly too surreal to be real, what then is the explanation that lies between these two worlds?
- **Characterisation:** Gregory is condescending.
 - He considers the gaming whilst seated on a chamber pot, to solve the problem of needing to pause his game every once in awhile.
 - However, chamber pots are hard to come by and thinks one might be gotten from China because “they were so backward there they probably still used chamber pots and played first-generation *Pac-Man*.” This obnoxious reasoning hints at his arrogance.
 - However, at the same time, we see that his addiction is so immense that he is constantly thinking in relation to games. This might be related to the surreal atmosphere and plot, and why he has a missing thumb.
- **Characterisation:** Gregory has confidence issues.
 - At this stage, this is merely a hint that is further supported later in the text.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gregory prefers his virtual body, the body of Fan, the hero whom he plays in his game. From its macho capabilities to the fact that is never so weak as to embarrass him or make demands of him, it is a fantastic body. ○ It might explain his addiction – he prefers to live his life as characters that he admires, successfully achieving great feats. Comparing that with a real human body, it is not difficult to understand why it is sometimes more preferable to escape reality for fantasy. ○ Later in the text, we get more evidence to support this characterisation and analysis.
<p>He finally sits up, his mind returning to the mystery of the missing thumb. As he looks around, he considers the state of his room. However, he is unable to find his thumb.</p> <p>We realise why he wants so much to defeat Nick's high score – Nick is his bully and has been for years. Although his dad advised him to stand up for himself, he found that he was far more frightened of doing so than being called names, and so, never did.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We realise why Gregory prefers his virtual body, and why he gets bullied. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He overweight which is why he has become the target of Nick's taunts since he was in Primary 4. ○ It also explains why he wants to defeat Nick's high score – to prove his worth to Nick, to himself and to his father. ○ Gregory feels a lot of shame and therefore retreats to the virtual world to gain a sense of value and capability. ● What's more disturbing is the imagery describing his current state. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He has been in bed for 64 hours. As someone with weight problems, that is anything but healthy. ○ The description of what his body feels rings more alarm bells: "he bent over, bones protesting, muscles groaning". It adds on to the jaw stiffness that he felt when he woke up, and the strange delusion about his thumb.

- The description of his room adds to the horror – it is absolutely filthy and not fit for a human to live in, with cobwebs, hair balls, streaks of damp dirt of unidentifiable origin, and a half-eaten quarter pounder covered with ants.
- What makes this worse is when Gregory considers dusting off the dust and ants from the half-eaten quarter pounder to microwave and consume again.
- **Characterisation:** Gregory is incorrigibly lazy.
 - He is so lazy and so addicted to his games that he has even disregarded his health and well-being.
 - He lives a disgusting lifestyle, as evidenced by the state of his room, and is unfazed by how filthy his habits are.
- **Characterisation:** Gregory is intelligent.
 - Once again, we are provided with evidence of this: he is so lazy with regards to his homework, and in his laziness, has figured out an efficient way of completing it well using the internet. It's not right but it works.
 - It is, therefore, all the more pitiful that he wastes his intelligence.
- **Characterisation:** Gregory is cowardly.
 - Standing up to a bully is understandably frightening, and whilst he was not brave enough to do so, it is understandable.
 - But, having stood down, he retreats even further, becoming ashamed of himself to the extent that he intentionally withdraws from society and marginalises himself.
 - This, coupled with his laziness, creates for a very toxic lifestyle.

Gregory reflects on Geoff, his older brother. Geoff is a doctor and so Gregory wonders if Geoff might have taken his thumb – after all, Geoff has a history of taking away and hiding Gregory’s things.

However, the more he looks at his stump, the more he wonders if he ever had 10 fingers in the first place. He considers the possibility that he is the product of evolution.

Finally, he gets up to relieve his bladder whilst fantasizing about his in-game maiden.

- We are given insight into another factor that contributes to Gregory’s lack of self-worth: his significantly older brother, Geoff, who is a doctor (i.e. intelligent, hard-working, well-liked). It doesn’t help that Geoff is an “incorrigible prankster” who has teased and bullied Gregory so often.
- **Foreshadowing:** “You have lost your head! ... If you are not careful, you will lose the rest of your head too!”
 - This memory foreshadows what is happening = Gregory has spent so much time playing games and staying in bed that he is hallucinating, and his body is breaking down.
 - However, this only becomes clear to us at the end of the text.
 - This also explains his strange behaviour from the moment he wakes up, and how easily he believes that Geoff might have taken his thumb and will return it later. It also explains why he thinks about having 16 fingers and paying for it because it would be for a good cause.
- Despite his bladder’s urging, he continues to hold his urine in for half the story.
 - His room is referred to as a “haven” (**diction**). In fact, he only leaves his haven “when he could not hold it in anymore”.
 - This tells us that he has withdrawn so far from society, that even the toilet, a room for bodily necessities, is a space he avoids until he absolutely needs to. It also explains the state of his room and his willingness to microwave dusty and ant-riddled food.

He returns to his room to continue with his game. As he does, he cannot shake off the feeling that his thumb is still in its rightful place, even if he cannot see it.

To add to the delusions, he believes that the in-game enemy, General Lee, bears Nick's likeness. The game is difficult and he is distracted by the ringing of his phone. In the midst of switching it off, his enemy takes advantage by hacking at his arm.

Sprawled on the ground, Gregory fights back and after an extended tussle, he succeeds in dealing the killing blow.

- As his game plays out, the **atmosphere** becomes more and more surreal.
 - Surreal: marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream.
 - His delusions get worse and worse. He is unfazed about being able to feel and operate his missing thumb. He also shrugs off the realisation that he was seeing Nick's face on his in-game enemy's body.
- The slowly developing horror of the story takes a turn for the worse when Gregory starts envisioning the battle as real.
 - **Dramatic irony** tells us that clearly unwell, both mentally and physically. It makes us wonder if something is happening to him at this point.
 - However, we cannot tell what is truly happening – we must, very helplessly, ride out his psychosis with him because the story is told from his perspective (**dramatic tension**).
 - "Gregory lay down, still clasping his right arm, sheer exhaustion cutting into his bones, filling spaces in every muscle. 'Yes!' he gasped, his breath becoming short and raspy." ← This description fills readers with further horror; is it real or imagined? We are desperate to know if he is safe.
- He is overjoyed and proud of himself (**feelings**) for having finally done what he believes is necessary to redeem himself.
- When he successfully defeats General Lee, he sees as vision of Yan-Er floating down towards him.
 - He believes that he can smell her and can breathe in her scent. He can also hear her "lilting, melodious voice". → Hallucinations.
- Yan-Er speaks to him, and her words give us a **sense of foreboding**.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “You are now in me as I am in you.” → The final nail in the coffin, pulling Gregory away from the real world. ○ “Till death do us part.” → Alas, it would not take too long to happen. With his eventual death, he will no longer be able to play that game ever again.
<p>Gregory is found on the floor in his room, dead. His position is strange, mimicking his last position in his game. He is holding on impossibly tightly to the game console.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our suspicions are confirmed – Gregory was very unwell from his poor health, his sedentary lifestyle and his unhygienic living conditions. • His hallucinations in-game were paralleled with what was happening in real life, but he was too far gone and removed from reality that he did not realise it. • In his bid to regain his sense of self-worth, and the pride of his father, and perhaps some measure of respect from Geoff, and to get back at Nick for years and years of torment, Gregory paid with his life.

Reflect:

- Was the price Gregory paid worth it? Why or why not?
- What are the pressures you face from Singapore society? How do they make you feel?
- Do you find yourself running away from your problems, or realities that you do not want to face? Do you intentionally marginalise yourself from society?
- If you do, what do you do as a form of “running away”? Is it, in any way, unhealthy?
- To cope with areas of yourself that you do not like, do you put others down or make unpleasant remarks about them (even if only to yourself) whenever the opportunity presents itself? If yes, why?
- What should have Gregory done besides turning away from society and turning to games?