

“Marigolds” by Eugenia Collier: Analysis

1. Is the story complete? Is it a cohesive whole? (*In essence, you're deciding if everything in the story works towards an intentional ending/resolution/message.*)
Marigolds has everything: believable and colloquial dialogue, amazingly detailed descriptions, a story that draws you in, an interesting and compelling message. So much depth to this story!
2. Are the characters believable? Why?
Lizabeth resembles, represents all young teenage girls. She represents kids who grow up in poverty. She's a sibling, she's a child struggling with growing into adulthood in a difficult world. She speaks like a real person and acts like a real person.
3. Is the setting described with enough detail? (*Not every story has as much detail as "The Reef," but you should ask yourself "Is it enough?"*)
Oh, it's enough in this story. The description of Miss Lottie's house, especially, is perfect.
4. What's the conflict? Is there an internal and/or external conflict? Is it resolved?
The conflict is twofold in this story: 1) Lizabeth struggles against poverty "Poverty was the cage in which we were all trapped, and our hatred of it was still the vague, undirected restlessness of the zoo-bred flamingo who knows that nature has created him to fly free." 2) Lizabeth struggled against adulthood. She's a child in this story who's between childhood and adulthood. That, combined with her poverty, causes the feeling of helplessness that she can't handle. She takes that helplessness out on Miss Lottie's flowers.
5. What's the message the author is trying to share? What's the central *theme(s)* of the piece? *hint: looking at what happens to the protagonist (main character) helps you understand what the author is saying.*
If everything in my life is ugly, yours needs to be ugly, too. You can't have what I can't have. We all need power over something in life. When we don't have control over anything, we will find something to control.

Analysis of “Marigolds” by Eugenia Collier

How does Collier develop her theme in “Marigolds”?

In her story “Marigolds” Eugenia Collier uses a particular setting and a particular child to represent larger, more pervasive truths on her way to her ultimate message, that people need power over something, and that people will struggle against our various “cages” in life. Her setting was rural, impoverished Maryland, in particular a poor, black community. Her character was a young girl, Lizabeth. She created a young, black, poor girl in a rural black community. Women in general have less power than men. Children have less power than adults. Black Americans have less power than white Americans. Rural folks have less power than their urban counterparts. Lizabeth is about as powerless as a person can be.

Collier also tells the story in first person POV, forcing the reader to empathize with Lizabeth, forcing us to feel the helplessness and rage that builds up within her. She begins to show us this message in the beginning of the story when she describes the poverty surrounding Lizabeth, “Poverty was the cage in which we were all trapped, and our hatred of it was still the vague, undirected restlessness of the zoo-bred flamingo who knows that nature has created him to fly free.” The “cage” metaphor echoes throughout this story, especially towards the end.

As the story progresses, Lizabeth, her brother, and her friends look for things to do in a neighborhood bereft of “things to do.” But as children tend to do, they find games to amuse themselves, often at the expense of others. This is a universal, that children will play. All readers understand this, so there’s no surprise when we see the children damaging Miss Lottie’s marigolds, just to get a rise out of her. It’s a little troubling, but little harm is done. The real story begins when Lizabeth hears her father angry about having no work, hearing his

sobs, knowing that someone who should be powerful is not. His helplessness makes her aware of her own. “suddenly he sobbed, loudly and painfully, and cried helplessly and hopelessly in the dark night. I had never heard a man cry before. I did not know men ever cried. I covered my ears with my hands but could not cut off the sound of my father’s harsh, painful, despairing sobs... How could it be that my father was crying? But the sobs went on... Everything was suddenly out of tune, like a broken accordion.” Lizabeth’s sudden knowledge that her father was helpless created a feeling in her that she couldn’t understand; his pain became hers, his cage makes her aware of her own cage, and she seeks a way out. The problem is that there isn’t a way out.

Before she even knows what she’s doing, she’s back at Miss Lottie’s house destroying the marigolds. She isn’t thinking, only reacting to her helplessness. Collier writes, “the old house [Miss Lottie’s] was like the ruin that my world had become—foul and crumbling,” Miss Lottie’s house was like Lizabeth, who thought her world was crumbling, who felt caged like a “zoo-bred flamingo.” Because of those feelings, “the hopelessness of our poverty and degradation, the bewilderment of being neither child nor woman and yet both at once, the fear unleashed by my father’s tear,” Lizabeth destroyed someone else’s beauty.

When she finishes tearing the flowers from the ground and trampling the garden, she looks up to see Miss Lottie standing there. Collier writes, “as I gazed at the immobile face with the sad, weary eyes, I gazed upon ... a broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility.” Collier describes Miss Lottie as an old woman who only had one beautiful thing left in her life, her marigolds. It soon dawns on Lizabeth that her destruction of that beauty was wrong, but there was no way to fix it.

The message, the truth, that Collier intends us to see has several parts. First, no one is content to be in a cage, no matter how long they’ve been caged. Second, people who have no power will seek it, and they’ll find that power wherever they can. Everyone longs to be in control of *something*, even if the expression of that control is destructive. Finally, The best way to demonstrate power is by creating beauty. Lizabeth realizes too late the significance of Miss Lottie’s flowers; she regrets her rash act of destruction, and seeks redress; the only way she can fix her mistake, however, is to learn from it. At the end of the narrative, she writes, “I, too, have planted marigolds.” Since she can’t *fix* the flowers she so childishly destroyed, she plants new flowers and passes beauty on to others. This symbolizes her growth into womanhood AND demonstrates her ability to use power for good.