

“Lizabeth!”

I leaped furiously into the mounds of marigolds and pulled madly,  Destruction


trampling and pulling and destroying the perfect yellow blooms. The fresh smell of early morning and of dew-soaked marigolds spurred me on as I went
270 tearing and mangling and sobbing while Joey tugged my dress or my waist crying, “Lizabeth stop, please stop!”

And then I was sitting in the ruined little garden among the uprooted and ruined flowers, crying and crying, and it was too late to undo what I had done. Joey was sitting beside me, silent and frightened, not knowing what to say. Then, “Lizabeth, look.”

I opened my swollen eyes and saw in front of me a pair of large calloused feet; my gaze lifted to the swollen legs, the age-distorted body clad in a tight cotton night dress, and then the shadowed Indian face surrounded by stubby white hair. And there was no rage in the face now, now that the garden was
280 destroyed and there was nothing any longer to be protected.

“M-miss Lottie!” I scrambled to my feet and just stood there and stared at her, and that was the moment when childhood faded and womanhood began. That violent, crazy act was the last act of childhood. For as I gazed at the immobile face with the sad, weary eyes, I gazed upon a kind of reality that is hidden to childhood. The witch was no longer a witch but only a broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility. She had been born in **squalor** and lived in it all her life. Now at the end of that life she had nothing except a falling-down hut, a wrecked body, and John Burke, the mindless son of her passion. Whatever verve there was left in her,
290 whatever was of love and beauty and joy that had not been squeezed out by life, had been there in the marigolds she had so tenderly cared for. **K**

Of course I could not express the things that I knew about Miss Lottie as I stood there awkward and ashamed. The years have put words to the things I knew in that moment, and as I look back upon it, I know that that moment marked the end of innocence. People think of the loss of innocence as meaning the loss of virginity, but this is far from true. Innocence involves an unseeing acceptance of things at face value, an ignorance of the area below the surface. In that humiliating moment I looked beyond myself and into the depths of another person. This was the beginning of compassion, and one cannot have
both compassion and innocence. **L**

The years have taken me worlds away from that time and that place, from the dust and squalor of our lives and from the bright thing that I destroyed in a blind childish striking out at God-knows-what. Miss Lottie died long ago and many years have passed since I last saw her hut, completely barren at last, for despite my wild contrition she never planted marigolds again. Yet, there are times when the image of those passionate yellow mounds returns with a painful poignancy. For one does not have to be ignorant and poor to find that one’s life is barren as the dusty yards of one’s town. And I too have planted marigolds. 

Release and Regret

squalor (skwŏl’ər) *n.*
a filthy, shabby, and
wretched condition, as
from poverty

COMMON CORE RL 4

K DRAW CONCLUSIONS

The narrator uses fairy-tale metaphors to describe Miss Lottie throughout the story, repeatedly calling her a witch and referring to “enchantment” surrounding her home. Reread lines 285–291, in which a change takes place in Lizabeth. Why is she suddenly able to see Miss Lottie as she really is?

L PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase the narrator’s thoughts about innocence and compassion in lines 295–300.

Loss of
Innocence

She gained
compassion

What does
it mean that
she, too, has
“planted
marigolds”?