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Initiation Stories: Different Processes of Maturation

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**DECLARACIÓN DE AUTORÍA Y ORIGINALIDAD DEL TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO**

Yo, ANA BELÉN COLL ARIAS, con documento de identificación 71357032S, y estudiante del Grado en Estudios Ingleses de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Granada, en relación con el Trabajo Fin de Grado presentado para su defensa y evaluación en el curso 2014-2015, declara que asume la originalidad de dicho trabajo, entendida en el sentido de que no ha utilizado fuentes sin citarlas debidamente.

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper will be focused on two American literary texts; its aim is to explain one of the types of short stories that became very popular in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are the so-called 'initiation stories'. In order to do so, some sources have been used such as the stories themselves and some articles to explain the main term 'initiation' and its features, among other important aspects. In addition, critical articles have been very helpful to the analysis of the stories.

The structure of this paper is the following; first of all, there is an explanation and definition, together with the origin of the term 'initiation'; the next section will explain that initiation stories are not merely reduced to short stories but the term is also operative in novels, using the German term 'Bildungsroman' for it; later on, the essay will continue distinguishing the different types of initiation stories as well as their distinctive features. These characteristics will be exemplified by means of a comparative analysis of both texts which would constitute the corpus of this composition. However, before contrasting both works, each story will be analysed by means of a close reading, specifying the most relevant parts and ideas of each story always providing evidence taken from the text. It would lead the readers to understand the similarities and differences of the two. Finally, a concise conclusion will be provided to highlight the most significant ideas of this analysis.

Also a list of works cited will be given; those works were used and helpful to the development of the paper.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. Origin and different definitions of the term 'initiation'**

It is important to clarify the origin of the term 'initiation' in order to better understand this paper. Indeed, it is an anthropological term which is associated with the idea of exposing young people to the experience of certain situations for them to achieve the shift from childhood to maturity. Anthropologically and philosophically, this term indicates teaching and body rites, mainly in some tribes, to create a social and psychological change of the person being initiated. Mircea Eliade believed that:

The puberty initiation represents above all the revelation of the sacred and, for the primitive world; the sacred means not only everything that we now understand by religion, but also the whole body of the tribe's mythological and cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup>

He claims that the term initiation involves three types of revelations: revelation of the sacred, of death, and of sexuality. This process would remodel young people's minds and help them to know themselves in a better way and would determine their way of thinking, hence, how they would act towards the world of social issues; in other words, what they think about social conventions. Some typical rites of initiation will be mentioned in order to better understand why this term is used in literary works as well. Usually, these rites are very severe and painful. Young people are subjected to certain ceremonies like incisions of the skin, having their tongues cut off or being circumcised. These kinds of rituals are performed to preserve culture. As they are painful, they have an impact on the young person so they will always remember it; in this way, they don't only notice a physical change but also a social change as they will not be treated as children anymore but as adults.

The adaptation of this term in literature also carries on the idea of painful realization but in this case it is not physical but rather affects the environment, by which the protagonists are surrounded, which affects their process of reaching adulthood. This will be explained deeply in section 3 through the analysis of the stories.

Up to this point, there is not a specific definition for 'initiation'; nevertheless, there are some possible definitions that contribute to delimiting the meaning of this term. According to Brooke and Warren (34) and West (75), initiation is a discovery of evil. West claims that the protagonist gets used to living with the discovery or new knowledge and little by little starts understanding it. Similarly, according to Adrian H. Jaffe and Virgil Scott (155) initiation occurs when

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<sup>1</sup> Eliade Mircea. "The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth". *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. p.3.

a character, in the course of the story, learns something that he did not know before, and... what he learns is already known to, and shared by, the larger group of the world.<sup>2</sup>

We could wonder why many writers define initiation as something 'evil', this has to do with the realization that young people suffer things like disappointment, loss of innocence and discover life with responsibilities. So they realize that the world is not as they thought and they start seeing the 'bad' side of the social world.

## **2.2 Bildungsroman vs. initiation stories**

Both terms are used to refer to stories of formation in which the protagonists are usually young people that go through new experiences, and this involves a character change. It may or may not include some rituals but there is a clear change of the perception of the world that usually has persistent effects on them. However, there is a slight difference between them. The German term 'bildungsroman' is frequently used for novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee, so you can see the epiphany or the process of maturity throughout the story, while initiation stories allude to short stories like "Indian Camp" (1924) by Ernest Hemingway and the painful realization happens in an abrupt way, that is, when the protagonist reaches that epiphanic moment suddenly.

Although it is true, as it has been said, that the protagonists are usually young people, but the story can also be told by adults who may be remembering and telling us about the unforgettable experience that happened to them which changed their lives from that moment on.

It is important to say that the fact that this term is brought from Germany makes us think that in Europe, by that time, this kind of narrative's plot was also popular. One example of this is the bildungsroman, by the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, called 'Aurora Leigh' where it is clearly visible the protagonist's development as an artist. Hence, this kind of literature was popular in Europe as well as in America and it

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<sup>2</sup> Mordecai, Marcus." What Is an Initiation Story?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*: Vol. 19, No. 2 (1960): 222. JSTOR. Web. 28 April.2015

dealt with the development of a character in physical terms as it is the case of Hemingway's short story or intellectually as in Browning's work.

### **2.3. Types and characteristics of initiation stories**

It is true that the process of maturity is different depending on certain circumstances and the personality of the person. As Marcus Mordecai explains (1960) we can speak of three different types of initiation stories: "tentative", "decisive" and "uncompleted". The borderline between them is very difficult to distinguish, that is, it is difficult to know exactly whether a story is tentative or uncompleted. However, although these types are very similar, they have a peculiarity that makes them different.

A tentative initiation story is a story where the protagonist is close to that maturity and understands it; it usually involves a self-discovery of his maturity or a change. However, he doesn't cross it so that highlights the startling effect on him. On the other hand, an uncompleted initiation story refers to the situation where the protagonist is in the early stage of maturity or self-discovery but the revelation leaves him with an internal struggle. So, although there is an understanding of the shift, he is not mature enough to do certain things like taking proper decisions, for instance. That is why it is said that he is in the earlier stages of adulthood. And finally a decisive initiation story is related to the environment and experiences that lead the protagonist steadily to maturity, so the young person comes into the adult world.

An important characteristic of all initiation stories is that they are comprised of an epiphany where the young protagonists see the disillusionment of the integrity of adults and of life in general. Nevertheless, not all of them discover the same, that is, that revelation can be related to love, death and evil, among other issues, which it will be proved through the analysis of the stories in the next section.



### 3. Corpus

#### 3.1. Analysis of the stories

##### 3.1.1. "Indian Camp" (1925) by Ernest Hemingway<sup>3</sup>

This short story was part of Hemingway's first volume of short stories called "Our time" published in 1925.

It deals with some themes like civilization vs. savageness. "Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders" (18); "The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear" (18) while the doctor and nurse figure would represent the civilized society: "The nurse should be here from St. Ignace by noon and she'll bring everything we need" (18); hence we could also talk about the idea of barbarian and primeval versus advanced and civilized, or innocence vs. maturity. However, we will focus only on the theme that concerns initiation stories.

This story chronicles a young boy, Nick, and his father who is a doctor; both (along with his uncle George) go to an Indian Camp to help a woman who has some difficulties in giving birth. Nick has to witness traumatic events such as seeing a Caesarian birth with a jack-knife and the discovery of the suicide of the pregnant woman's husband. The savageness of these events will scar him forever as they will introduce him to the realities of birth and death. As explained before, that awakening of the real world is usually painful, either physical or psychological. Here, we have a clear example of such a combination; while on the one hand, we have the physical suffering of the labour and the death of the husband (bloody episodes), on the other hand, we can see a psychological one, especially when he is faced with that physical pain, so we could say that those childish and naïve thoughts, shown at the beginning, are contrasted with the cruelty, suffering and death that he observed. These happenings are very symbolic in this story as they would condition Nick's point of view about the world.

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotes have been taken from Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1930. pp. 15-19. Print

A real progression in Nick's character can be clearly seen throughout the short story. For instance, it is portrayed through the scenes in the boat; while at the beginning of the story Nick sits on the stern of the boat by his father's side, then, after having seen such scenes, he sits in the stern and his father is rowing the boat on the way back. That makes us think that the awareness may have taken place in the Indian Camp and that something happened quickly in the mind of Nick that provoked a change of behaviour.

The protagonist's behaviour is very significant since it allows a close reading of this kind of stories. We can see that Nick, from the very beginning of the short story, appears as a young boy who needs to be close to his father and feels protected "Nick lay back with his father's arm around him." (p.15) Nick follows his father wherever he goes. This is the typical behaviour of children, mostly when they are out of their environment and they are in unknown places with unknown people, they tend to be closer to their parents to make sure that they are secure. Probably Nick would feel fear because of the woman's screams, and nervousness because he was going to witness an important event; therefore, he wants to observe his father in action

All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what is happening when  
She screams."  
"I see," Nick said.  
Just then the woman cried out. (p.16)

Still, this behaviour changes abruptly when they come back to the boat as he does not sit at his father's side "They were seated in the boat. "Nick in the stern, his father rowing"(p.19). This could be the reaction after being exposed to the violence of reality. He realizes that things were not as easy as he thought and that he feels so disappointed. Probably he prefers to sit down in another seat and think about the things he has experienced. This is called 'separation phase' (Guerin et al. 1992:154)

The protagonist's innocence is very well reflected though some quotations such as "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die" (p.19) and also through the dialogue of the

characters: "Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?" (p.16) this quotation represents Nick's innocent to solve this problem. He thinks that just by giving her some pills, for instance, she would recover. This naivety is contrasted by the experienced father who wants his son to learn and realize the reality of life. "You see, Nick, babies are supposed to be born head first but sometimes they're not" (17).

It could be said that one of the most symbolic moments in the story is when Nick turns his head when his father tries to show and teach him new things that belong to the 'adult world' like the process of being born: "Nick didn't look at it." (17); "He was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing" (17).

It could be a reaction after seeing these existential events, as he starts to realize that life is more complicated as it seemed to him before. This act could be seen as if he did not want to grow up. It is fair to say that it is difficult to give a concrete reason because we do not know much about Nick's behaviour after the discovery, nor his age; but we could state that it is likely that he refuses the idea of reality being so awful and evil for him so he wants to remain in his childlike world. This is called the 'Peter Pan syndrome' which is characterized by the refusal to accept adult life.

Nevertheless, he is, inevitably, exposed to that reality again when he sees the dead man. So what is initially a lesson about birth becomes one about death. It is not until he sees the corpse that he starts to ponder several things. As we can see at the end of the story, Nick gradually starts asking his father several questions. If we analyse the dialogues, it is interesting to note how this process of maturity occurs in him. When his father tries to explain something related to the labour, Nick answers that he knows it but the father replies that he does not know it. Probably the father is warning him that what he is going to witness is something that he had never experienced before. Therefore, this may be related to the idea that children consider their parents as heroes who know everything. Yet, at the end of the story, Nick bombards his father with so many questions, but this time his father is not sure about some of them. "Why did he kill himself, Daddy?" – "I don't know, Nick." (p.19) this quotation has been

selected because it shows that teenagers, who start becoming adults, see that their parents are not perfect and do not know everything.

### **3.1.2. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee**

The theme of this novel is not only about childhood but it is also a criticism of the society's hypocrisy at that time. The title would be related to the idea about the injustices that the innocent had to pay for the sins of the guilty. However, this paper will focus only on the behaviour of Jem and Scout and their points of view.

This story revolves around a family: Atticus, a lawyer, and his two children, Scout and Jem. The children are almost always together; on their way to school, they pass Boo's house, an isolated and mysterious man who never goes out. As the story is told by Scout, a five-year-old girl, it relates childlike adventures. However, they have to witness certain events, such as Tom's trial, which will be crucial for the development of the story and in turn for the children's growth. His father has to defend a black man accused of rape; this awakens the curiosity of the town and a great amount of people go to the court to witness the verdict. Atticus is criticized and pressured for defending a black man. Finally, Tom is found guilty and he goes to prison where he will be shot when he tries to break free. This event shocked the town but much more Jem and Scout who experienced it closer than anyone. Both feel indignation about the result of the trial and about the mentality of society, which shows that little by little they are developing their own perspective of the world.

It might be useful to state that the ambiguity in relation to the narrator's viewpoint and temporal perspective have been questioned by many critics recently. The story could have been retold by Scout when she is not a child anymore; however, this book plays with this ambiguity.

From my point of view, the fact that she speaks in the past tense makes me think that Scout has achieved maturity when she is retelling the story, but when she uses the direct speech, she recounts the story at the time that the events happen, hence, the occurrence of that infantile language sometimes. "“Don't you touch him!”" (...)

Barefooted, I was surprise (...) I intended to kick his shin, but aimed too high" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 156)

The narrator combines the narration with some commentaries so that makes us think that the narrator is distant from the event of happening.

Jem and Scout are the centre of the story. As said before, many childlike adventures take place in this book; nevertheless, there are mainly two events from which they will learn important things, which would be related to their epiphany, such as the justice and injustices of society through the case of Tom Robison and also to respect and understand human beings, in this case thanks to Boo Radley.

This character is considered a villain from the very beginning of the story; however the children little by little, start considering him as a human being and try to understand his situation. It might be at that point when we can talk about that maturity commencing.

Yet, both children do not achieve maturity at the same time; consequently, both characters will be analysed independently. Scout is a five-year-old innocent girl. She admires her brother simply because he is older and so, he has some privileges that Scout does not have; for instance, going to school. She is very excited to go there as she has heard about it from her brother. School will be an important factor in the process of her maturity as it will be explained later.

We can appreciate this innocence in Scout's character throughout her behaviour, for example when Scout and Jem are in front of the jail and see that a group of men comes to frighten and warn Atticus that defending a black man will try bad consequences. Scout, in her innocence, identifies Mr. Cunningham and asks: "Hey Mr. Cunningham. How's your entailment gettin' along? (...) I go to school with Walter" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 157). She does not understand the seriousness of the situation and wonders why he does not answer her: "I was slowly drying up, wondering what idiocy I had committed (...) 'What's the matter?' I asked" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 158)

Also, the following example may be interesting as well "You never went to school and you do all right, so I'll just stay home too" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 35). This is a very

common reaction for a child when it comes to something happening that they do not like. As mentioned before, Scout is very excited to go to school but it was not as excited as she thought. Scout does not understand that she has some obligations at school and it is not a matter of pleasure. Hence, she starts questioning why her father works as a lawyer without having gone to school. In this way, a little change in her is taking place as she is wondering things, concerning their social value and how society functions, so she is somehow looking for answers.

The maturity process is progressive throughout the story. As clarified above, school plays an important role for her. "For some reason, my first year of school had wrought a great change in our relationship" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 39). It will help her to realize certain things about society.

A significant moment in her maturity is when she dares to explain to the teacher the poor economic situation of Walter. So the fact that she has enough maturity to talk about adult social problems makes her a little more mature as she is aware of the adult world's reality. This can be seen when Scout speaks with her teacher about the Cunninghams' situation: "The Cunninghams never took anything they can't pay back (...) They don't have much, but they get along on it" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 26).

This is also reflected when she attends the trial. Her interest in what will happen in the trial is related to the awareness of the differences of classes, the racial prejudice and to the concern of more complex things. Nevertheless, the epiphany of this character could be presented when she starts feeling uncomfortable playing with her brother and Dill and prefers to spend time with Miss Maude. She could represent that feminine side or motherly figure for Scout.

I kept aloof from their more foolhardy schemes for a while (...) I spent most of the remaining twilights that summer sitting with Miss Maudie Atkison on her front porch (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 47)

However, it is Jem who best represents this shift. Even though we do not know his internal thoughts, by means of his acts we can see his development. While it is true that he has always been the older of the two, his behaviour was quite childlike at first. He spends the summer playing and looking for exciting adventures. At first he could not understand why the word of a white man was superior to that of a black man. But

progressively he grows up, "I was not to approach him with requests to enact a chapter of Tarzan and the Ant Men, to embarrass him with references to his private life..." (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 21-22). He is being initiated into the adult world; he starts being the protector of Scout away from home and worries about what could happen to Scout or the consequences of taking her to adult places like the trial. He becomes more interested in teenage issues; he reads football newspapers and joined a football team so he does not play children's games anymore. Also he starts discussing justice issues with his father.

It is noticeable that Jem is more concerned about the judge's verdict than Scout. It could be said that he is very interested in the final decision as he knows it would have important social effects on the town but furthermore, it can also be considered that he is very worried about his father as he feels close to the hard situation through which his father is going through. That is, he is thinking of the moral and social consequences that everything can have after the trial. So, he starts being aware of certain things "I've thought about it lately and I've got it figured out. There are four kinds of folk ..." (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 230)

Once again, his shift towards maturity is visible. Besides, Calpurnia starts calling him Mr. Jem which creates a social status change as well. Also Jem changes physically "He was growing taller" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 228), and it brings with it changes of behaviour, confusion and fear which is very typical in teenagers "Jem was twelve. He was difficult to live with, inconsistent, moody" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 119).

The key moment for Jem to begin realizing that things are more complex than he thought could be was when he is forced to go to Mrs. Dubose's to read to her as a kind of punishment. Then he realizes that he gets a personal satisfaction from helping people and being consequent of his acts. Similarly, as stated before, the trial scene is the crucial episode for both children. It could be interpreted as the moment when he really faces reality; this confrontation of the new reality is painful, though not physically painful in this case. Therefore, three types of progress may be mentioned: by changing his mentality he becomes more confident and sensitive, by the social shift he changes into a more amiable boy and finally, the physical development.

It is important to clarify that the title is very symbolic and may allude to the loss of Jem's innocence. That is, the title could refer to the death of the naivety of Jem because, as clarified above, the hard events that Jem witnesses push him further towards the adult world. Hence we could establish that parallelism between killing a mockingbird and the shattering of the young protagonist's innocence.

### **3.2. Similarities of the protagonists in the process of maturity**

Both texts deal with the consciousness of a young boy about reality by means of certain experiences. These life events help them to move from an innocent and naïve world to a state of maturity and consciousness towards different present situations. Death plays an important role in the two stories as it could be seen as the beginning or culmination of the awakening into real life.

In both stories, the fathers play an important role as they pay special attention to their father's behaviour and they are considered similar to heroes for them. They are responsible for giving moral lessons to their children. In both cases, the fathers want their children to face reality and become more mature.

### **3.3 Differences of the protagonists' behaviour throughout the stories**

The most evident difference between both works is that "Indian Camp" belongs to the category of "short stories" while *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be considered as a "bildungsroman" whose characteristics have been detailed at the beginning of the paper in section 2.2.

Both stories have different narrators, in Hemingway's work it is a third person omniscient narrator whereas Lee's story is told by a first person internal narrator (character-narrator).

When it comes to the epiphany, both share the symbolic idea of death as a kind of agent to complete this realization; however, in the short story the young protagonist only gets the understanding by means of witnessing another character's death. Yet, in the bildungsroman, death is one of the things that makes them more sensible about the importance of certain things. The awakening is also different, it could be said that



in “Indian Camp” it is a much physically painful realization whereas in the other story it involves a psychological experience. Also, the progression of maturity is slower in Lee’s work and we can see Jem’s mental and physical growth.

Finally, both stories belong to different typologies of initiation stories. On the one hand, *To Kill a Mockingbird* would belong to the decisive initiation story as it is the environment and his inner experiences that lead the protagonist steadily to maturity, so we could say that Jem comes into the adult world and achieves that mature state.

On the other hand, “Indian Camp” could be analysed as an ‘uncompleted initiation story’ as Nick is distinctly coming of age, thus, he may be in the early state of maturity, including self-discovery about it but the revelation causes him many internal disputes. This is perceptible mostly at the end of the story.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, some determining ideas of the paper should be highlighted. It is important to keep in mind that the term initiation is a concept not only used in those ceremonies or rituals but it also carries the idea of introducing something new, thus, this sense has also spread to the domain of literature.

Initiation stories are not reduced to short stories but as it has been shown throughout the paper, there are some dense novels that can deal with this idea of experiencing and passing the border line from childhood to adulthood such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Although we can talk about different types of initiation stories the boundary between them is not very easy to identify.

When it comes to the comparison of the texts, the principal theme of both comes to us rapidly, which is the idea of growing up and the processing of learning new things as well as the awareness of painful things or situations, usually coming from the adult world. It is also important to highlight the role of the fatherly figures in both texts. The fathers appear to be guides of their children by providing tips and moral lessons and

accompanying them through that painful and difficult process of going through the adolescent period, for it, they try to help them to face reality.

On the other hand, some obvious differences can be appreciated too; this has to do with the length of the tales, while the first one belongs to short story type-like, the second one is labelled 'bildsgunroman', so the time of reaching the epiphany may vary as well, but the difference of both terms lies mainly in the length. Another important difference is that both protagonists have experienced the epiphany in different ways, that is to say, the painful revelation is achieved through different factors. As it has been argued before, the epiphany can be conditioned by different kinds of events such as death, love and evil; while the idea of death is more present in "Indian Camp", it is true that it can also be seen in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as it has been commented on before, however, the predominant idea in this novel is the awareness of evil of society by the racial discrimination of society and the injustices and prejudices of the white society, among other things.

These ideas can be the basis of this paper from which other dependent ideas, but not less important, may be developed in the future.

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