**A Summer’s Reading** / Bernard Malamud

**Summary**

A Summer's Reading is a short story about George Stoyonovich, a 19-year-old boy, who dropped out of school on an impulse when he was 16 years old. Since he hasn’t completed his formal education, he cannot find a decent job. He thinks about going back to school to complete his education, but finds excuses for not doing so.

**How does George spend his time?**

During the day, he stays at home. He cleans the house whenever the house gets on his nerves. He reads magazines and newspapers that Sophie, his sister, brings from the cafeteria (a place where she works). He reads the World Almanac and the News and Mirror. In the afternoons, he listens to the ball game on the radio. After supper, he walks through the neighborhood and goes to a park where he fantasizes about a better life he would like to have. Around midnight, he goes back home.

When George meets Mr. Cattanzara, one of the neighbors, he is ashamed to admit that he hasn’t been doing anything. He tries to impress Mr. Cattanzara and gain his respect by telling him a lie about a hundred books he has been reading. Mr. Cattanzara spreads a rumor that George is reading, and, as a result, George gains a lot of respect from the people in the neighborhood. Even his sister, Sophie, shows him that she is proud of him by giving him a weekly allowance.

Though George enjoys this respect, he doesn't start reading. He tries to avoid Mr. Cattanzara, but one night the encounter is inevitable. George recognizes from Mr. Cattanzara’s walk that he is drunk and hopes Mr. Cattanzara will not notice him, but he does. He treats George like a child, offering him a nickel to buy himself a lemon ice, exactly the way he did when George was a young boy. He asks George to name him one book he has been reading, and when George can’t answer his question, Mr. Cattanzara warns him not to do what he did.

After this conversation, George locks himself in his room for almost a week. He understands that Mr. Cattanzara knows that he has lied about reading the books and he is afraid that Mr. Cattanzara has revealed the truth about him to the neighbors. When George can no longer stand the heat in his room, he bursts into the street and discovers that people are still friendly to him. He believes Mr. Cattanzara has forgotten about their meeting because he was drunk. But when someone asks him if it is true that he has finished reading so many books, George understands that Mr. Cattanzara has spread another rumor.

One evening in the fall, George goes to the library, counts off a hundred books and then sits down at a table to read.

**George** - General Information.

\* George quit high school on an impulse when he was 16 because he ran out of patience.

\* George can’t find a decent job since he hasn’t completed his formal education.

\* He gives many excuses as to why he couldn’t complete his education. These excuses show that he is passive and does not take responsibility for his actions.

\* During the day, he cleans the house whenever the house gets on his nerves, but most of the time he stays in his room. \* He reads the newspapers and magazines that Sophie brings from the cafeteria.

\* George also likes to read old copies of the World Almanac - a book that contains a lot of information and facts about the world. This implies that he is willing to broaden his horizons.

\* In the afternoon, he listens to the ball game on the radio. George’s Family

\* George’s mother is dead.

\* George’s father works in the fish market and leaves for work very early in the morning. He is a very shy person who doesn’t say much.

\* George’s sister, Sophie, works in a cafeteria in the Bronx. She takes care of the family. She is 23 years old. She resembles George.

\* George’s family is poor. His father and sister don’t earn much money.

\* They live in a five-room railroad flat about a butcher’s store. The neighborhood

\* It is a poor immigrant neighborhood in New York City.

\* It is a hot and stony neighborhood.

\* The sidewalks are broken.

\* There are no trees lining the streets.

\* The people live in small flats above stores.

\* In the hot evenings, the neighbors sit in front of the shops fanning themselves.

**The Park**

\* In the evenings George goes to a darkly lit little park.

\* The Park is isolated from the outside world by an iron railing.

\* The Park is green and blooming (as opposed to his neighborhood).

\* In the park George dreams about a different reality - a better life: having a good job, having money in his pocket, living in a private house with a porch, having a girlfriend and being respected.

**Mr. Cattanzara**

\* He is a change maker who works in a change booth on an IRT station.

\* He lives in the same neighborhood as George, above a shoe repair store.

\* He reads the New York Times (a newspaper read by educated people) from the first page to the last, which implies that he is intelligent.

\* Once in a while he gets drunk. He is a quiet drunk who never makes any trouble.

\* He is a different type than those who live in the neighborhood:

a) He asks different questions than others.

b) He seems to know what goes on in all the newspapers.

c) He is intelligent.

\* Mr. Cattanzara spreads two different rumors about George because he hopes to make a change in George’s life.

\* Mr. Cattanzara is frustrated. We learn this from the piece of advice he gives to George: “Don’t do what I did”. We can understand that though he is very intelligent, he probably hasn’t completed his formal education and, therefore ended up working as a change maker. The contrast between his intellectual abilities and his boring life makes him frustrated, and he finds comfort and escape from his life by getting drunk.

\* Mr. Cattanzara’s role is very important - a change maker (double meaning):

a) His job - a change maker (literal meaning)

b) He is the one who causes a change in George. (Symbolic meaning)

**VOCABULARY**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **RECEPTIVE** | **PRODUCTIVE** |
| ashamed | ashamed – be ashamed of |
| carpentry | carpentry |
| dissatisfied | dissatisfied with |
| got on his nerves | get on one’s nerves |
| iron railing | occasional |
| mop-a mop-to mop | on an impulse - impulsive |
| occasional | to quit |
| on an impulse | to register |
| quit-to quit | to resemble |
| register | to respect |
| resemble | sidewalks |
| respected-to respect | to wander |
| sidewalks | worthwhile |
| sultry | to appreciate |
| wander | approval |
| worthwhile | drunk |
| appreciate | embarrassed |
| approval | to figure – to figure out |
| as a favor | to hesitate |
| drunk | to urge |
| earnestly | to wonder |
| embarrassed | annoyed |
| erect | deserted |
| figure | to neglect |
| hesitate | tempted |
| regarded him highly | uncomfortable |
| stocky | accidentally |
| urge | to admit |
| whistle | confidence - confident |
| wonder | rumor – spread rumors |
| annoyed | to struggle |
| deserted | to tremble |
| felt wound up | change maker |
| neglected | to run out of patience |
| sneak into | to escape reality |
| stifling | can’t stand |
| sway | intelligent |
| tempted | to encourage |
| uncomfortable | to motivate |
| accidentally | formal education |
| admit | to waste potential |
| confidence | to end up |
| disgrace | immigrant |
| inward | to pick up one’s education |
| listless | to warn |
| rumor | to make a change |
| struggle |  |
| tremble |  |
| wilted |  |
| run out of patience |  |
| change maker |  |
| can’t stand |  |
| intelligent |  |
| weekly allowance |  |

**QUESTIONS** (5 points)

1. Explain why you would/would not like to have George as a friend.
2. Describe and explain why you would/would not like to have lived in the time or place of

the story.

1. Write how you would feel if you were the main character’s family member (George’s father; Sophie). Explain why you would feel this way.
2. Explain a character’s problem and then offer your character advice on how to solve his/her

problem.

1. Which character taught you the most? What did s/he teach you and how?
2. What choices did the character have? What choice did they make? Why?
3. Did you like the end of the story? Why did you like it? If you did not like it, how would

you change it?

1. Is the setting important to the story? How?
2. What lesson does this story teach about life? How does it teach it?
3. Describe a time in which you faced a similar problem to that the main character faces. How

did you solve it? How would the character have solved it?

1. Explain how the story you have learned is relevant to the time it was written.
2. If the events of the story happened at present, how would they be different?
3. Describe an event from your own life/the life of someone you know personally and

compare it to one of the themes/conflicts/messages of the story.