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**Grade 9 Five-
Paragraph Essay
EXEMPLAR**

From Innocence to Experience

The old expression, “If it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger” is a reminder that even though life can be very difficult at times, it can also be used to strengthen one’s character and ability to deal with adversity in the future. For example, Evan Hunter’s “On the Sidewalk Bleeding,” Langston Hughes’ “Thank you Ma’am,” and Budge Wilson’s “The Leaving” all show how the innocent and somewhat naïve protagonists gain maturity and experience because of their struggles. The first character to make such a change is Andy who, because of being stabbed, gains a greater appreciation for life, realizes that his girlfriend loves him, and learns that the jacket does not define him. Roger also grows from being confronted by the woman he is trying to rob and learns that his victim has a history just as he does, that he still has a chance to be good, and that society can also be good to him. Finally, Sylvie, upon making a difficult move from home, learns that she has power to change her life circumstances when she leaves her childhood home, when she sees the vastness of the world around her, and when she explores the possibility of going to university. Clearly, the challenges of all three protagonists help them move from innocence to a more experienced view of the world.

To begin, Andy moves from innocence to experience as a result of being stabbed by a rival gang member. First, when Andy is stabbed he comes to appreciate life much more. Lying in pain on the sidewalk makes Andy believe that “he [does not] want to die [because] he hasn’t lived yet” (Hunter 42). Although this is tragic and sad, Andy still learns that life is

valuable and should not be wasted. This ends his childhood naivety that life is unending and replaceable. Additionally, the stabbing helps Andy understand the love he has for his girlfriend, Laura, more completely. Andy's pain helps him realize that he "suddenly hungered for Laura's mouth [and longed to] kiss Laura again" (39). His pain again helps him respect the value of life more, including the relationship he has with his girlfriend. This maturation is one that is valuable and could not have occurred without the stabbing. Finally, the stabbing helps Andy realize that material objects (like his jacket) have no meaning and that titles do not define him. He realizes that although "the purple jacket has always seemed so important to him before...now it seemed like such [a] small thing in a world he was missing" (42). In this case, Andy desperately tries to take off the jacket because he wants to be remembered as himself, not as a gang member: "*I'm Andy*" (42), he claims just before he dies, showing that he now understands his value is in who he is, not in what he wears. Therefore, although it is tragic that Andy is stabbed, this painful experience leads him to some important life lessons.

The second character who becomes more experienced as a result of his struggles is Roger from "Thank You Ma'am" when he attempts to steal a purse from Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. This experience helps Roger become more aware of how he views the world. For one, Roger realizes that he must respect even the elderly people in his life because they have much life experience to offer him. When Mrs. Jones tells Roger that "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get" (Hughes 74), Roger realizes that he could learn from her. He realizes that her experiences are valuable and that he could stop robbing people, just as Mrs. Bates has stopped craving things she could not have. Secondly, Roger's confrontation with Mrs. Bates helps him realize that he still has a chance to do better in the future. He realizes that "he did not want to be mistrusted" (75) which shows

how Roger wants to change and be a better person in the future. His encounter helps him leave his childish ways and accept the responsibility of growing up. Lastly, Roger learns that *other* people in the world can do good things as well. When Mrs. Bates helps him, Roger realizes she is genuinely a good person. This realization is particularly hard for Roger to face which is why “he couldn’t even say [thank you ma’am] as he turned...and looked at the large woman in the door” (75). However, it is clear that Roger is more aware of Mrs. Bates’ goodness and has more hope that others can be like her one day. Clearly, Roger’s experience with Mrs. Bates helps him move from his innocent childhood to a more mature view of the world.

The last character who moves from innocence to experience is Sylvie in “The Leaving.” Sylvie begins to change as a result of leaving her comfortable home on the farm and moving to the city. Influenced by her mother, Sylvie’s worldview changes because of leaving the confines of Annapolis and the farm. She comments that the “ten-kilometre walk [shunts her] straight from childhood to adolescence” (Wilson 109). Although this move is difficult, the struggle is one that helps her become a more mature young woman. Sylvie also gains experience when she arrives in the large city of Halifax. The city awakens Sylvie to another way of life, noting that “Halifax was a shock” (110). The large buildings, the noise, and the modernity all show her that there could be more to a woman’s life than peeling potatoes. Although this transition is a shock to her, it again transitions Sylvie into a more knowledgeable view of the world. Finally, Sylvie gains experience when her mother asks her to consider going to university. When her mother suggests “maybe you’ll come here some day t’learn” (112) Sylvie’s mind opens to the greater possibilities in her life. She realizes again that her childhood innocence is over and she must now become a woman. This transition is ultimately completed when her father calls her “woman,” showing the

finality of her transition from innocence to experience. Evidently, Sylvie's experiences with her mother and in the big city awakens a change in her world view, which leads her to becoming a fully mature young woman.

In conclusion, each of the three short stories presents a youthful protagonist who is met with a situation that leads them from innocence to experience. Andy very quickly learns that the sense of belonging and importance he gets from being in the Royals is meaningless. In his dying moments, he finds value in his life, his love and his individuality. Similarly, in robbing Mrs Jones, Roger finds a lesson in compassion and kindness. By giving Roger an experience with dignity, it changes his worldview about others and the possibilities for himself. Lastly, Sylvie's trip shocks her into adolescence. The journey, her mother's suggestions, and their dignified return all show Sylvie that the future has more possibility than imagined. Andy, Roger and Sylvie all go through experiences that change their view of the world and themselves in it. Life's experiences can be difficult but they strengthen one's character and ability to deal with adversity in the future. These three characters provide examples of surprise experiences that become very life-changing for youth on the edge of adulthood.

Works Cited

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