

Analyze how the author is talking about human behavior in the context of the story.

In Bel Kaufman's Sunday in the Park, the short story is used as a comment on particular features of human behavior. Specifically, the author presents two aspects of human behavior: one which is 'natural', instinctive, and intrinsic to an individual, and the other, which is rational, learned or acquired behavior. The author creates a situation that causes the reader to evaluate which of these two aspects of human behavior is more 'natural'. Surely, if instinctive behavior is innate, whilst rational behavior is learned, then it stands to reason that man's 'natural' state of behavior is to be wild, aggressive and uncontrollable. From the story, Kaufman's view of human behavior leans toward the idea that each person shows evidence of *both* forms of behavior; that for most 'normal' individuals, subconsciously, each facet of behavior is in constant conflict with the other. And that the degree to which one particular side will prevail depends on how much an individual has learnt the rules of conventional human behavior and is able to control his instinctive self.

Kaufman introduces this concept systematically; he builds up the concept of reason versus instinct right from the onset of the story. By locating the story in a park somewhere in a city, Kaufman introduces the dichotomy of city and park, each of which symbolize the two different aspects of the story's main theme – the conflict between instinct and reason. The setting of the story in a park is a deliberate symbolic allusion to the park as a return to nature. The park symbolizes a reversion to base, 'animal' behavior; to a location not bound by societal norms and rules of modern civilization. The author even hints at this distancing from city life, and hence from societal expectations by

writing, "...*the city noises came muffled through the trees in the park.*" Thus the onset of the story provides a subtle hint as to what themes are to be developed through the story.

Joe is a little boy, probably around three years of age. While playing with Larry, the unnamed narrator's three-year-old son, Joe flings a spadeful of sand at his playmate. In the story, Joe's actions provide a means for the author to pose the question of how much of human behavior is innate and how much of it is learned or acquired from others such as parents or other older people. When Kaufman writes, "*Where was his mother?*" he is presenting the notion of childhood as the foundation for acquiring social skills and learning experiences through interaction with older people. It signifies the mother's, the unnamed narrator's, subconscious search for a responsible figure to reinforce the rules of normal social human behavior as to what to do and what not to do. Kaufman is exploring the idea that the parent determines the child by influencing what behavior the child exhibits, or will grow up to exhibit. He is looking into the role of socialization between generations in teaching a child the difference between right and wrong.

Kaufman uses the characterization of each man, Joe's father, and Morton, Larry's father, to raise the question, "What happens when the boundary between reasonable and instinctive behavior is removed or becomes less clearly delineated? In other words, what is the effect of the presence of this barrier between reason and instinctive behavior?" By means of character contrasts, Kaufman uses each man to represent the extreme opposite ends of the behavioral spectrum.

Morton is the epitome of rationality and reason, "*When he spoke to the man, it was with his usual reasonableness.*" Morton is a man who has learnt to control his inner urges or 'savage' instincts. Joe's father, on the other hand, is uncontrolled. He pays no

attention to social niceties and does what he wants without concern for conventions of expected behavior. It is no accident that the author has Morton reading the *Times Magazine*, a mature news journal, while the other man reads the Sunday comics; comics typically being exaggerated, slightly ‘childish’ depictions of reality. Moreover, physically, the two men are complete opposites. Morton’s description is that of a bespectacled, physically small man, with a “*fine, lean face*”. Joe’s father, on the other hand, is described as a “*big man*” one who seems to “*be taking up the whole bench*”.

The unnamed narrator, the mother embodies a more ‘realistic’ combination of these two character extremes. Her subconscious is split in two. On one hand, the mother’s rational self does not want Morton to fight Joe’s father, knowing that he (Morton) will probably lose any fight with the bigger man. But on the other hand, her ‘baser’ instinctive self relishes the possibility of a fight –a show of strength in order to prove a point and restore “*justice*”. And this intuitive desire is the basis for the mother’s reasoning when she says, “*She wanted to put her hand on her husband’s sleeve, to pull him down, but for some reason she didn’t.*”

The author uses a change in the mother’s feelings to reinforce the concept of reason versus instinct. At the beginning of the story, the mother’s first instinct is to punish Joe for throwing sand at her son. But her rational self questions the consequences of such an act. Thus, she controls her instinct. Why? Because she has learned that it is the responsibility of the person in charge of a child to correct or discipline the actions of his/her ward. But by the story’s end, the mother has undergone a change in feeling. Reason and instinct both vie for dominance. The mother subconsciously despises Morton for not exhibiting physical aggression. When the narrator says, “*Indeed?*” ... “*You and*

who else”, she is showing contempt for her husband’s ‘weakness’. Kaufman has the narrator express this conflict by saying, “ *Her first feeling was one of relief that a fight had been avoided, and that no one was hurt. Yet beneath it there was a layer of something else, something heavy and inescapable. She sensed that it was more than just an unpleasant incident, more than the defeat of reason by force.*” Kaufman implies that despite social skills formed as result of human interaction, a part of the human psyche is wired as to value physical aggression and actively seeks to cultivate it.

In conclusion, Kaufman uses the disruption of a normal event – an idyllic family trip to the park – to introduce basic concepts and ideas about fundamental human behavior. By using conflict between reasoned and instinctive behavior to point out the shared universality of certain human experiences, Kaufman causes the reader to evaluate the implications of the uneasy coexistence between reason and instinct within the human personality. He shows how when the routine, the everyday, the humdrum, is disturbed by the unexpected, surprising conclusions arise as to how individuals react in unfamiliar situations.

Bibliography:

Sunday in the Park, Kaufman Bel