

The Fall of a City by Alden Nowlan (adapted)

Peter's Radical Introduction

The Fall of a City is not a story about an unusually cruel family. It is a typical American family, and perhaps a typical global family. The child, Teddy, is largely ignored and mistreated. He suffers from powerful negative feelings like anger and could become violent, violent enough to destroy anything he can. So, if you're wondering how adults can wage wars, destroy Nature and ruin the future, just look at how those adults were raised.

Peter's Radical Writing Tasks

1. Describe the protagonist and the villain in five or more sentences.
2. What should the adults do? How should they treat the boy instead? Provide details. Five sentences.
3. What does the story teach us about why boys become violent? Discuss at least three specific reasons found in the story. Five or more sentences.
4. The boy, Teddy, treats his toys like people, whereas in reality military leaders treat soldiers and civilians like toys. Explain in about five sentences.
5. Teddy's uncle mocks him for playing with dolls. How is this sexist and false? Do you believe 'dolls' are only for girls? Are some colors, toys, and books good for girls but not for boys? Express your ideas in five or more sentences.
6. Teddy's name is short for Theodore, which means "Beloved by God." Explain the irony of this in *The Fall of a City*, and discuss what it means in connection with the fact that one of the imaginary rulers is named Theodore.

Alden's Story

Outside, rain fell with such violence that great, pulsating sheets of water seemed to hang suspended between earth and sky. Squatting in the attic, Teddy watched raindrops roll like beads of quicksilver down the glass of the high, diamond-shaped window, and listened to the muted banjo twanging on the roof.

Blinking, he transferred his attention to the things that lay around him on the floor. In the center of the room stood a fort and a palace, painstakingly constructed from corrugated cardboard cartons. These were surrounded by humbler dwellings made from matchboxes and the covers of exercise books. The streets and alleys were full of nobles, peasants and soldiers, their two-dimensional bodies scissored from paper, their faces and clothing drawn in crayon and lead pencil. From the roof of the palace, hung a green, white and gold tricolor, the flag of the Kingdom of Upalia.

Somber gray eyes glinted in Teddy's pale, triangular face. He decided that what he heard was not the rattle of rain on the roof and window, but the muffled roar of distant cannon. The armies of the Emperor King of Danova were attacking the fortifications on the Upalian frontier!

Teddy inhaled deeply and held his breath, his thin chest pressing against his sweatshirt. His Majesty, King Theodore, emerged on the balcony of his winter palace in Theodoresburg, capital of the Kingdom of Upalia. Through the square below rode squadrons of lancers and horse artillery; behind them marched regiments of soldiers. Grasping the diamond-studded hilt of his sword, King Theodore watched his army march out to give battle to the enemy.

This would be the third war between Danova and Upalia. The first had been fought in the year 2032 and had ended in the defeat of the Emperor King and his imprisonment on the Isle of Hawks. But he had escaped, and in 2043 the Danovans had invaded Upalia a second time, aided by a force under the command of Zikla. This time, they conquered Theodoresburg and massacred the people before being defeated by King Theodore. On the day of the victory, the Duke of Anders was brought to Theodoresburg in chains and hanged in the city square.

The Emperor King was evil and cunning. Now, riding a black war-horse, he directed his troops as they invaded Fort Lion on the Carian River. Hopelessly outnumbered, the defenders rallied behind their commander, Duke Lani of Caria, and prayed for the coming of King Theodore . . .

“Teddy!”

He sighed. This was his aunt shouting from the foot of the stairs.
“Theodore!”

He opened the door. “Yeah?” he called sulkily.

“Come down here this minute and get ready for supper! How many times do I have to call you?”

“I’m comin’, I told yuh!”

His sneakers whacked the carpeted stairs.

She stood in the hall, a tall, stooped woman with tired, suspicious eyes.

“Seems to me that you’re spending a lot of time in that attic.” She wiped red, swollen hands on her apron. “You been in some mischief up there?”

He shrugged impatiently. “I ain’t been doin’ nothin’ . . . just playin’,” he told her sullenly.

“Well, young man, you better wipe that scowl off your face and get ready for supper.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he enunciated carefully.

During supper, he was so deep in thought that his pork chop tasted no different from his whipped cream and Jell-O. Mechanically, he obeyed his aunt when she told him to take smaller bites and to take his elbows off the table. He was deciding upon the tactics that would be used by King Theodore in relieving the attack of the fort by the river.

If the Upalian army crossed the Tabelian marshes, they might succeed in encircling the Danovans, but there was the risk that their cannon would sink in the bog. On the other hand, if they climbed the Theodoran mountains . . .

“Look what you’re doing, for heaven’s sake!”

“Huh?”

His aunt glared at him. “Don’t say ‘huh’ when you answer me. Look what you’ve done! You’ve spilled cream all over yourself.”

Blushing, he rubbed his sweatshirt with a paper napkin.

“He’s got his head in the clouds again.” His uncle laughed. “Half the time, he doesn’t know whether he’s living on Earth or Mars.”

“Well, he better smarten up if he knows what’s good for him,” his aunt grated.

“If he doesn’t, I know something that will smarten him,” his uncle said. He laughed again and reached for another helping of potatoes. Behind him, cloudy white marbles of rain slid down the window.

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran down Teddy’s spine. What if the Danovans attacked Theodoresburg while the king and his army were in the mountains? Old Kang was as cunning as a serpent. If . . .

“He spent most of the afternoon in the attic,” his aunt said.

His uncle gave him a disdainful look. “He just about lives up there, doesn’t he?” “Yes. I think it’s about time that one of us went up there and found out what he’s been doing.”

“No!” Teddy cried sharply.

His uncle laid down his knife and fork. “Look here, mister, I don’t like your tone of voice. Have you been up to some of your monkeyshines up there?”

Teddy stared at his plate. “No,” he said.

“Look at me when I speak to you. Have you been playing with matches up there?” Teddy looked up. “No,” he repeated. “I ain’t been doin’ nothin’.”

“You better not be, not if you want to be able to sit down the rest of the week.” The man resumed eating. “After supper, I’ll take a look and see just what you have been doing.” As his aunt gathered up the dishes, his uncle went into the living room and sat down in his easy chair to read his newspaper.

Teddy sat by the window and looked out at the rain. The sodden grass of the lawn had turned a darker green and foaming rivers of rainwater ran down the street. He shut his eyes. Here in the kitchen he could not hear the strumming of the rain on the roof. There was no rumble of Danovan cannon. Anyhow, the cannon were only playthings: scraps of cardboard held together with tape. What did it matter if his uncle saw them, or even destroyed them? But it did matter. Theodoresburg had been growing for a year and, often, it seemed more real than the town, the street and the home in which he lived with his uncle and aunt.

“You’d better get at your homework. You won’t get it done by sitting there staring out the window,” his aunt told him.

“Yeah.” He fetched exercise books and spread them on the table. His aunt and uncle did not mean to be cruel, he knew. From time to time they showed that they were fond of him. Twice that summer, his uncle had taken him trout fishing and on both occasions there had been something subtly warm between them. And sometimes he detected a hint of affection in his aunt’s voice even as she nagged him. But . . .

His uncle stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“You’d never guess what the kid has been doing up there!” He shook his head in wonder and amusement.

Teddy flushed and stiffened. His aunt turned from the sink where she was drying the rest of the supper dishes.

“What’s he been up to, now?”

“You’d never believe it, but that great big lummoX has been playing with paper dolls!”

“They ain’t paper dolls,” Teddy mumbled. He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

“They look pretty much like paper dolls to me. Paper dolls and doll houses. An eleven

year-old boy!” The man choked, trying to restrain his laughter. “I never heard of such a thing. Paper dolls!”

“They ain’t dolls, I told you!” Teddy’s fists were clenched, his arms stiff by his sides, his voice shaking.

His uncle pointed a warning finger. “Don’t get saucy now, mister. I know paper dolls when I see ‘em.” Once again he burst into laughter. His cheeks were the colour of a tomato.

“Sit down and finish your homework, Teddy,” his aunt said. To his surprise, her voice was not harsh; it contained a suggestion of weary sympathy. He resumed his seat and tried to focus on the blue lines in his exercise bok. His uncle, still chuckling, returned to the living room and picked up his newspaper.

Paper dolls! And he could never explain – they would never let him explain. Theodore, King of Upalia, and all his armies . . . paper dolls! He slumped, doodling on the paper before him so that his aunt would think he was working. Yes, they were paper dolls. There was no King Theodore, no Emperor Kang, no Theodoresburg, no Upalia, no Danova. There was only an attic full of preposterous cardboard buildings and paper people.

It was still daylight when he finished his homework. The rain had stopped, but water still poured from the elms along the street. When Teddy went through the living room, his uncle did not speak, but he glanced up from his newspaper and grinned slyly. The boy was blushing to the roots of his hair as he opened the hall door and started up the stairs. The city was as he had left it. Yet everything had changed. Always before when he had come here, his flesh had tingled, his eyes had shone with excitement. Now there was only a taste like that of sour milk.

He bent and seized the cardboard palace. Gritting his teeth and grunting, he tore at its walls. The corrugated board was sturdy; he was crying by the time he finished tearing it to shreds.

Selected Response Questions

Circle the letter of the correct or BEST answer.

1. . . . “*listened to the muted banjo twanging on the roof*” (paragraph 1). What literary device has been used to create this image?

- a. Apostrophe
- b. Assonance
- c. Metaphor
- d. Personification

2. From which point of view is the story narrated?

- a. First person
- b. Second person
- c. Third person limited
- d. Third person omniscient

3. Based on the context in which it is found, what is the meaning of the word “*humbler*” in paragraph 2?

- a. Bigger
- b. More destroyed
- c. More important
- d. Simpler

4. Which of the following is NOT true of Teddy?

- a. He feels alienated
- b. He has a strong imagination
- c. He is bold and daring
- d. He is sensitive and moody

5. In the opening sentences of both paragraphs 3 and 4, the writer describes some of Teddy's physical traits. What impression do these descriptions create?

- a. Teddy is a small, weak child
- b. Teddy is poverty stricken
- c. Teddy has been abandoned by his parents
- d. Teddy has never been allowed to play outside

6. The following line is the ending of paragraph 6: “. . . and prayed for the coming of King Theodore . . .” When the reader considers the ending of the story, what is the significance of this line?

- a. It creates flashback
- b. It contributes to the dialogue
- c. It is ironic
- d. It is the climax of the story

7. Refer to paragraph 38 of the story. Which type of conflict is developed in this paragraph?

- a. External conflict
- b. Internal conflict
- c. Interpersonal conflict
- d. Societal conflict

8. “*The man joked, trying to restrain his laughter.*” (Paragraph 47) Which word best describes the tone of this laughter?

- a. Embarrassed
- b. Humorous
- c. Joyous
- d. Mocking

9. “*To his surprise, her voice was not harsh; it contained a suggestion of weary sympathy.*” (Paragraph 50) What does this imply about Teddy's aunt?

- a. She agrees with her husband's treatment of Teddy
- b. She has always been gentle with Teddy
- c. She has always known about Teddy's hidden city
- d. She understands how her husband's words make Teddy feel

10. Which of the following best describes the characterization of Teddy?

- a. He is a flat (static) character
- b. He is a round (dynamic) character
- c. He is a minor character
- d. He is the narrator

11. Based on the context in which it is found, what is the meaning of the word “*preposterous*” in paragraph 51?

- a. Complicated
- b. Foolish
- c. Painted
- d. Sturdy

Constructed responses: COMPLETE ALL CONSTRUCTED RESPONSE ITEMS IN YOUR EXERCISE BOOK. Please write the title of the story and the date as your heading.

1. What does the city in the attic symbolize. Explain with at least TWO specific references to the story.

2. Identify and explain the atmosphere of this story. With THREE references to the story, show how the atmosphere is created in the opening paragraph and maintained throughout the story.