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Bird Girl ***Clark DeLeon***

Preview

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Is this old saying true? Or can teasing hurt, and hurt deeply? In the following selection, made up of three columns first published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Clark DeLeon writes about the lasting scars—and the tragedies—that can result from childhood teasing, and his readers respond.

Words to Watch

sallow (1): sickly, pale yellow
tacitly (1): silently
lest (2): for fear that
greasers (3): tough, bullying teenagers
defiant (5): bold
unrelenting (7): not stopping
contend (8): struggle
malicious (8): mean
taunts (8): insults
encounter (9): meeting
eluded (10): escaped
mobile (11): movable
instigators (11): leaders

Targets: A Lesson in Life

There was a weird girl in my high school whom we all called the Bird. We called her that because of her nervous, birdlike movements and the way she would hunch her shoulders toward her ears as if she was hoping her head would disappear into her body. She had sallow^o skin that looked as if it had never felt the sun, and there was usually a blotchy red rash in the middle of her forehead. She had fine black hair on her arms long enough to comb, and she wore clothes that had been out of fashion since Shirley Temple was singing “The Good Ship Lollipop.” She was also the object of such contempt and scorn, such cruel ridicule, that it shames me to this day to think I was part of it, even tacitly^o. 1

Oh, I was never one to say anything to her face. I wasn’t that brave. I’d wait until she hurried by with her books held tightly to her chest and join in the chorus of birdcalls with the other guys. She was always good for a laugh. And it’s important when you’re a teenager to join the laughter, lest^o the laughter turn on you. 2

I remember one day when the Bird was surrounded by three or four suburban-variety greasers^o who had stopped her in the corridor between classes. They were flapping their arms and screeching in her ear. She was terrified. Her eyes darted in panic. A couple of her books fell to the floor. When she stopped to pick them up, they bent over her in a circle, closing in, screeching, screeching. 3

Then this girl came out of nowhere. I’d never seen such anger in a girl before. She went up to the leader of the tormentors and ripped into him with a hot fury. “Stop it!” she shouted. “Can’t you see what you’re doing?” The guys backed off, stunned. Then the girl went over to the Bird and put her arm around her shoulder and walked her to class. 4

I thought about the Bird when I read about Nathan Faris, the little boy who shot a classmate and killed himself after being the target of teasing by the kids in his school. I thought of how I had been a part of her misery, how more than 20 years later it still bothers me. But I also think of what I learned that day about decency and bravery, about being a human being, from a girl whose name I don’t even know. And I wonder if that one act of defiant^o kindness may have saved another girl’s life. 5

Targets: Why Are Kids So Cruel?

“I just had to write to you in regard to your item ‘Targets’ that appeared in today’s (March 8) *Inquirer*,” wrote Ray Windsor of Lansdowne. 6

I received several letters about that piece, which concerned a girl I knew in high school who was the victim of cruel and unrelenting^o ridicule because she was unattractive, uncool and unable to defend herself. That 7

piece touched a chord in people, and I think Ray's story will, too. Here it is:

“Back in high school I had to contend° with many of the malicious° 8
deeds and taunts° from my ‘fellow students,’ similar but different. With
me, however, I was a victim of gross physical immaturity. . . . I actually
didn't start shaving regularly until I was 25 or so.

“This problem was very hard for me to deal with, even though it was 9
out of my control. The class ‘bullies’ and insensitive and uncaring types
never hesitated for one moment to knock me around, having read my
problems like a book. Gym class, especially, was my psychological
encounter° with hell—twice weekly. Because of my outward appearance,
I always skipped showering with the rest of the class. Eventually, they
caught on to this and many of the guys would either throw me in the
showers, or if they didn't do this, they would spit in my underwear or
socks or shoes and then (usually) chuck them out of the window to the
ground two stories below.

“Is it no wonder I was sick as often as I could be on Gym Day? Oh, 10
all the wonderful FUN they had at my emotional expense. I once
mustered the courage to talk to my ‘guidance counselor’ about the prob-
lems I was contending with, and all he was able to tell me was that this
was the type of thing that students like myself go through to become a
man. How I was to become a man through all this eluded° me, primarily
because I was being treated as less than human by these jerks.

“Once this pattern was set up, I easily became a target for much the 11
same outside of gym. Often I was pushed and shoved in the hallway. On
occasion, I was tripped or punched, and on special occasions, I would
even be tossed into the mobile° trash cans and rolled into classrooms that
weren't even mine. I may have been bigger than some of these instiga-
tors°, but I could never seem to get the courage to bring a fist up to their
ugly faces. It was always THEM against ME. How often I broke down and
cried out of sheer frustration is uncountable. What really gets me is
that I let this happen. Is it any wonder that I turned to alcohol and had two
major ulcer operations before I was 25?

“As I suspect you know by now, I have picked up the shattered pieces 12
of my adolescence and have gotten my life back together again. The
HATE and RAGE I once felt for these ne'er-do-wells has since turned to
pity. In fact, they are no doubt half-decent guys now. But if they only
knew how much harm they'd caused me, they'd become a little upset with
themselves. At least I hope so, anyway. I only wish that someone had
yelled, ‘Stop it! Can't you see what you're doing?’ back at school. It may
have saved me from much of the misery I was forced to endure until I
graduated from that hell hole.”

That's Ray's story. I've got my own, and you probably have yours. 13

How did we survive those years? How did we endure the anger, the shame, the emotional brutality? And we're talking middle-class suburban kids, here. We're talking the seeds of the promised land. If parents only knew what their kids were going through, what their kids *are* going through. 14

I don't know if there's an answer. How can we make teenagers treat each other like human beings? How can we penetrate that closed society of adolescence? How can we let the victims know that life gets better? How can we shame the bullies with what they will feel about their actions, if they ever grow up? 15

Kids: Lessons Learned Early

I want to share something with you, something nice. 16

It's what some kids have had to say in letters to me about the column about the Bird, the girl I knew in high school who was teased and tormented by everyone, until one day another girl stood up to a group of guys who were picking on the Bird. You wonder when you write something like this about growing up, how kids will receive your message. Here are some of their reactions: 17

"I read your article about the weird girl called the Bird," wrote Stephanie K. "I am in the sixth grade, and one of my classmates is weird like in your article, and we too make fun of him. We don't make fun of him as much anymore. We used to make fun of him all day long. . . . I really thought about what you've said and I want to thank you for taking time to write something that will prevent other people from feeling bad." 18

"I have read your story about the girl that was called the Bird because she had pale skin and acted weird. In the story, you said that you were one of the ones who teased the Bird," wrote Cuong N. "You also spoke highly of the girl who came up to you and your friends and told you guys to stop teasing the Bird. If you spoke highly of that girl, why didn't you do the same thing, or were you scared of being teased too? If I was in your place, I would have done the same thing you did and prevented myself from being teased. Please write back to me if you can." 19

"I would probably have done the same thing as you did," wrote Katie M. "Now that I read the story and understand the problem going on, I wonder why more people aren't like the kid who came and helped the Bird." 20

"I think the girl who stood up for the Bird was very brave," wrote Nicole G. "She could have been beaten up or teased, but she did it anyway. I really look up to and respect people like that." 21

“I think that you shouldn’t have held back what you thought about the other kids teasing the Bird, because that makes you in a way worse than the others,” wrote Michael C. “If you felt that the girl reacted bravely for sticking up for the Bird and that she was a good person for doing what she did, why didn’t you at least find out who she was?” 22

I wish I had found out her name, Michael. And I respect people like that too, Nicole. And I too wonder why more people aren’t like the girl who helped the Bird, Katie. And the reason I spoke highly of the girl is that I was afraid to do what she did, and her bravery inspired me, Cuong. And I’m especially glad that you’ve stopped teasing your sixth-grade classmate, Stephanie. Thank you all for thinking about the story the way you did. 23

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

To the Student: The three “First Impressions” questions that follow each selection allow you to write freely about your first reactions to what you have read. Normally, you won’t be handing in this writing to your instructor. It is personal writing that focuses your ideas about the selection and its relationship to your own life. Don’t worry about making mistakes. Just get your reactions down on paper.

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Who do you remember being teased at your school? Why was this person teased? How did you respond when you saw the teasing?
3. Why do you think teasing is so common among children and teenagers?

VOCABULARY CHECK

The explanations below each question on the following pages are provided to help you understand how to answer the questions and complete the other items in this book. Try to figure out each answer yourself first. Then check your answer. Study the explanation, especially if your response wasn’t correct. As you work on the exercises, cover the explanations below the items with a card or piece of paper so you’re not tempted to look at them until *after* you’ve tried the items yourself.

The vocabulary words covered in the first four items are not defined in “Words to Watch,” so it’s up to you to figure out what they mean. But that doesn’t mean you have to guess the answers blindly. First, read each item to see if you already know the answer. If you don’t, start by crossing off one or more of the words that you’re sure are wrong. Then try replacing the *italicized* word in the item with each answer that’s left. The word that fits best is right.

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *contempt* means

- a. praise.
- b. disgust.
- c. envy.
- d. love.

“She was also the object of such contempt and scorn, such cruel ridicule, that it shames me to this day. . . .” (Paragraph 1)

The sentence suggests that *contempt* has a meaning similar to that of “scorn” and “cruel ridicule.” Knowing this should help you rule out “praise” and “love.” Then you can try “disgust” and “envy” in place of *contempt* in the sentence. “Envy” doesn’t make sense, so your answer is “disgust” (*b*).

2. In the sentence below, the word *insensitive* means

- a. intelligent.
- b. friendly.
- c. unfeeling.
- d. far away.

“The class ‘bullies’ and insensitive and uncaring types never hesitated for one moment to knock me around, having read my problems like a book.” (Paragraph 9)

To answer this item, ask yourself how bullies would feel about someone else’s problems. The sentence says they are “uncaring,” a clue that the answer is *c*, “unfeeling.”

3. In the sentence on the next page, the word *mustered* means

- a. fought.
- b. gathered.
- c. refused.
- d. ignored.

“I once mustered the courage to talk to my ‘guidance counselor’ about the problems I was contending with. . . .” (Paragraph 10)

Here, the question to ask yourself is what Ray would do to his courage before talking to someone about his problems. Discussing personal problems would take courage for anyone and would probably have been especially difficult for Ray. He would not want to fight or refuse or ignore his courage. So the right answer is *b*, “gathered.”

4. In the sentence below, the word *endure* means
- commit.
 - enjoy.
 - borrow.
 - put up with.

“It may have saved me from much of the misery I was forced to endure until I graduated from that hell hole.” (Paragraph 12)

What would the writer be forced to do with misery he couldn’t avoid? He would have to “put up with” it, so the correct answer to this one is *d*.

- B.** Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from “Words to Watch.”

The second set of vocabulary items checks your understanding of terms from “Words to Watch.” Each item requires you to choose the word from “Words to Watch” that best fits the situation. If you need to, look back at the definitions that appear before the essay on page 31. Then try each possible definition to see how well it fits. Cover the answers at the end of this exercise while you do the items. Then check to see how well you did.

- If a girl has a very *sallow* complexion, you might conclude that she
 - spends a lot of time inside.
 - comes from a wealthy family.
 - spends a great deal of time in the sun.
- When the enemy captain demanded, “Surrender!” the leader of the rebels *defiantly*
 - put down their weapons.
 - burst into tears.
 - shouted, “Never!”

7. A *malicious* answer to the question “How do I look?” would be
 - a. “You look lovely.”
 - b. “Have you lost weight?”
 - c. “Really ugly.”
8. Little Johnny reached for a cookie. His mother gave her *tacit* approval by
 - a. shouting, “Don’t you dare!”
 - b. smiling at him as he took it.
 - c. saying, “Go ahead, Johnny. You can have one.”

Check your answers: 5. *a* 6. *c* 7. *c* 8. *b*

READING CHECK

The next ten questions check your understanding of the selection’s content. You’ll be asked to identify the central point, or thesis, of the entire selection and then the main idea of at least one of its paragraphs. Next come questions on the key supporting details. After the detail questions are questions on inferences—ideas that are not directly stated in the selection but are clearly suggested. The final questions focus on the writer’s craft, and they concern techniques the author used in writing the selection.

Central Point and Main Ideas

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
 - a. Gym class is the worst place for teenagers who are victims of teasing.
 - b. Childhood and adolescence are difficult times for many people.
 - c. A classmate’s courageous action may have saved a girl’s life.
 - d. Teenagers should learn to stop being cruel to people who are different.

Sometimes all of the possible answers for an item like this one are true, but some are *too narrow*, which means they give only details, not main ideas. Others are *too broad*, giving ideas that are more like the subjects of whole books than the central points of essays. If you can’t find the correct answer right away, cross out the sentences that give details instead of general ideas. Here, sentences *a* and *c* give supporting details, so they’re definitely wrong—they are too narrow. That leaves sentences *b* and *d*. Can you tell which of these two sentences is too broad? It’s sentence *b*, which contains a bigger subject than the selection does, a subject that could have a whole book devoted to it instead of just three newspaper columns. So, by eliminating the wrong answers, you’ve found the right one, sentence *d*.

2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 11?
 - a. Ray was teased a great deal while in school.
 - b. Once the teasing started, it took over Ray’s life.
 - c. Ray eventually began drinking and had two major ulcer operations.
 - d. Ray didn’t have the courage to fight back.

To answer an item like this one, look back at the paragraph it covers (11) to remind yourself of what it’s about. Then, try to choose the correct answer. If you can’t, go back to read the paragraph again. Sometimes the paragraphs you’ll look back at will have topic sentences that state the main idea, but this one doesn’t. Therefore, you’ll have to decide for yourself what the main idea of the paragraph is. A good way to start is by crossing out the sentences that are too narrow, *c* and *d*. These sentences both give details. Two general sentences, *a* and *b*, remain. Sentence *b* is the better choice of the two because it includes the idea that the teasing affected Ray’s life.

3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 19?
 - a. Cuong had read the story of the Bird.
 - b. Cuong thought the author should not have admitted being scared.
 - c. Cuong wanted the author to write back.
 - d. Cuong would not have stopped the teasing but wondered why the author had not tried to stop it either.

Again, look back at the paragraph (19). Then cross out the sentences that state details rather than main ideas—*a* and *c*. (Notice that although sentence *a* refers to the first sentence of the paragraph, which is often the topic sentence, this time that sentence is not broad enough to be a topic sentence.) To choose between the remaining sentences, *b* and *d*, look for the one that does a better job of stating the overall idea of the paragraph. The sentence that does the best job of stating the main idea is sentence *d*.

Key Supporting Details

Questions about key details give you a chance to check your understanding of the information the author provides to back up the central point and main ideas. To answer this type of question, you may need to look back at the selection to check on details you’ve forgotten.

4. The girl in the article had gotten the nickname of “the Bird” because of
 - a. her movements and posture.
 - b. the hair on her arms.
 - c. the whistling sounds she made.
 - d. her high voice.

Did you look back at the description of the Bird in paragraph 1? It says that the Bird's nickname was based on "her nervous, birdlike movements and the way she would hunch her shoulders," so the answer is *a*.

5. The most humiliating experiences for Ray Windsor took place in
- math class.
 - the lunch room.
 - gym class.
 - English class.

This question is answered in paragraphs 9 and 10, where Ray calls gym class "my psychological encounter with hell" and goes on to describe the other boys' throwing him into the shower or tossing his clothing out the window. He was treated so badly, in fact, that he "was sick as often as [he] could be on Gym Day." Thus the answer is *c*.

6. After reading DeLeon's article, a student named Stephanie K. wrote that
- she thought DeLeon was in a way worse than the other students who had teased the Bird.
 - she looked up to people like the girl who had defended the Bird.
 - DeLeon should have found out the name of the girl who had defended the Bird.
 - she and her friends are now teasing a "weird" classmate less often.

The paragraph in which DeLeon mentions Stephanie is paragraph 18. Stephanie says that she also has a weird classmate whom she and the other kids used to make fun of, but they "don't make fun of him as much anymore." She does not say that DeLeon was worse than the others or should have found out the name of the other girl. Nor does she say that she admires the girl. These statements are made by other students in paragraphs 21 and 22. So the correct answer must be *d*.

Inferences

For this group of questions, you will be drawing conclusions about what the author means but does not state directly.

7. The author suggests that Nathan Faris
- might have been helped like the Bird if someone had stood up for him.
 - was probably very different from the Bird.
 - was justified in shooting one of his classmates.
 - was too weak to defend himself.

You can find the answer to this question by skimming rapidly to find Nathan Faris's name. It's mentioned in paragraph 5. Reading the whole paragraph will give you some clues to the answer, but the best clue is in the last sentence: "And I wonder if that one act of defiant kindness may have saved another girl's life." This means that DeLeon thinks the girl who spoke up to protect the Bird may have prevented her suicide. If that's the case, just one person speaking up might have kept Nathan Faris from shooting another person and killing himself, so the answer to this question is *a*.

8. _____ TRUE OR FALSE? The author implies that the problem of teasing in adolescence is not very important.

You have to think about the whole selection to answer this item. Think back to the examples of the Bird, Ray Windsor, and Nathan Faris. Would you call the teasing and problems they had to put up with "not very important"? No, especially when you consider the effects the teasing had on their lives. So the answer is FALSE.

The Writer's Craft

This group of items asks about the way the selection was written. It includes questions about topics such as how the author organized the selection and supported general ideas.

9. As the signal words *when* and *then* indicate, paragraphs 3 and 4 present
- items in no particular order.
 - events in time order.
 - comparisons and contrasts.
 - examples.

Think about the words *when* and *then* in each of the types of situations mentioned in the answers. *When* and *then* wouldn't be needed if details were given in no special order (*a*), nor do they point out similarities and differences (*c*) or examples (*d*), so you've found the right answer: *b*.

10. The author's purpose in writing these columns is to
- entertain readers with stories of schoolchildren.
 - inform readers of ways to combat teasing.
 - persuade readers that childhood is an important time of life.
 - persuade readers that young people's cruelty to each other must be stopped.

Was this selection meant just as entertainment? If you look back, you'll see that the ideas in it are rather serious, so you can eliminate *a*. Among the answers that are left, *b* can be dropped because DeLeon is more emotional about his subject than someone who was just giving information would be. Between *c* and *d*, *d* is the better choice because it is about the topic of the piece, young people's cruelty toward each other.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The four questions that follow provide you and your classmates with a final opportunity to further your understanding of the selection. Your teacher may ask you to respond to these questions individually or in small groups as well as in a large classroom setting.

1. Many centuries ago the Greek philosopher Philo of Alexandria made the following observation: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." What do you think he meant by this statement? How might it apply to "Bird Girl"?
2. In paragraph 2, DeLeon says that "it's important when you're a teenager to join the laughter, lest the laughter turn on you." What does he mean? Is he correct?
3. Why do you think so many readers wrote to DeLeon about the story of the Bird?
4. DeLeon asks, "How can we make teenagers treat each other like human beings?" How would you answer this question?

PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENTS

Your teacher may ask you to write a paragraph or an essay on any of the following topics. Notice that the first topic in each set helps you get started by suggesting a possible central point for your paper.

1. Write your own paragraph about a person who was teased or bullied in your school or neighborhood. Describe the person and then explain how others treated him or her. Make your description detailed enough so that your readers can picture the person clearly and understand what happened. Use a topic sentence such as "Gordon was bullied a lot by my eighth-grade classmates because of his unusual behavior."

2. Considering the social pressures for teenagers to be “part of the crowd,” the girl who helped the Bird was especially brave. Even under less difficult circumstances, people do not always go out of their way to help others through an act of kindness. Write a paragraph about a time someone you know did go out of his or her way to help another person. Possible examples might include caring for a sick person, taking in a foster child, doing volunteer work, acting as a family peacemaker, or providing financial or moral support at a time of crisis. Include vivid details so your readers can clearly picture what happened.

ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. DeLeon admits that he regrets two things: taking part in teasing the Bird and not finding out who the girl was who stepped in to stop the teasing. Write an essay about three regrets in your life. They might be things you did and later wished you hadn't, or things you didn't do and later wished you had done. Explain what happened in each case, and then tell why you wish you had handled things differently. Try to support your general idea with details as interesting as the ones DeLeon uses. Your thesis statement might be similar to the following: “I can think of three regrets I have about some of my past behavior.”
2. When Ray Windsor went to his school guidance counselor to talk about being teased, he didn't receive much help. What would you do if you were a counselor who had been asked to come up with ideas to help students treat one another better? Write an essay in which you make detailed suggestions for what teachers and students could do to make your school a friendlier, gentler place. You might want to include such ideas as buddy systems, in which seniors act as personal counselors to younger students; discussion groups of students and teachers; or an anti-teasing education campaign.