

Pär Lagerkvist

“Father and I”

1954

Pär Lagerkvist

Name: Pär Lagerkvist (1891-1974)

Place of Birth: Sweden

Genre: Poetry, drama, novels, stories, essays

Type: Existentialism and cubism

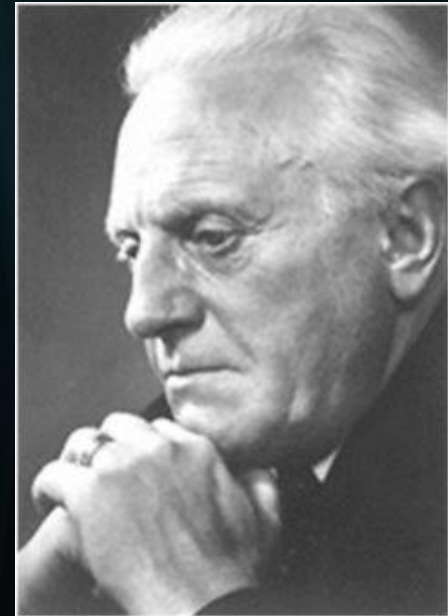
Awards: Nobel Prize in Literature

Major Works:

- *Ångest (Angst)*
- *Barabbas*
- *Evil Tales* (starts with "Father and I")

Themes:

- The fundamental question of good and evil
- Endless darkness and the responsibility of a person to save himself/herself, not as an immortal soul but as a vitally mortal self



Background: Society and Culture

- The twentieth century introduces a cultural period in which individuals not only reject the past but also question the very basis of knowledge and consider the possibility that knowledge and concepts once thought to be fixed and objective are instead constantly shifting and subjective.
- Philosophers and thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud challenged nineteenth-century science and the positivist confidence in its ability to explain both the physical and social worlds in completely rational terms.
- World War I had a powerful impact in its aftermath, causing Europeans to reconsider their very belief systems and leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the authorities who, many believed, were motivated by greed, class exploitation, and hunger for power.
- New studies in the relationship between reality and appearance led to the philosophy of existentialism.

Background: Existentialism

Existentialism (video)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSOImo5Xi-Y>

Father and I



“Father and I”

Directions: As you read the story, look for key elements.

- Setting
- Characters
- Plot
- Point of view
- Conflict
- Foreshadowing
- Theme
- Symbols

“Father and I” Setting

- Place – Railroad line at beginning of story; woods at end of story
- Time – Sunday afternoon until nighttime
- Weather conditions – Warm, sunny at first; dark later
- Social conditions – “The early part of the 20th century saw massive changes in the everyday life of people in cities. Inventions of the automobile, airplane, and telephone shrank distances around the world and sped up the pace of life. These changes were accompanied by a rise in the literacy rates of the general public. Masses of dead bodies strewn upon the ground, plumes of poison gas drifting through the air, hundreds of miles of trenches infested with rats—these are but some of the indelible images that have come to be associated with World War I (1914-18). It was a war that unleashed death, loss, and suffering on an unprecedented scale” (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*).

“Father and I” Setting

“World War I had a powerful impact in its aftermath, causing Europeans to reconsider their very belief systems and leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the authorities who, many believed, were motivated by greed, class exploitation, and hunger for power. A growing interest in psychology influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud contributed to a new emphasis on the internal reality of individuals, the importance of the self, and the alienation of the self in modern society. New studies in the relationship between reality and appearance led to the philosophy of existentialism as represented in the philosophical writings of Albert Camus” (*The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*). Pär Lagerkvist’s work was heavily influenced by the philosophy of existentialism.

- Mood – Light at beginning of story; dark at end of story

“Father and I”
Characters

1. The son – A nine-year-old boy
2. The father

“Father and I”
Father

1. Characteristics - Religious
2. Static character

**“Father and I”
Son**

1. Characteristics – Insecure, atheist
2. Developing character

“Father and I”

Plot

A father and son set out for a Sunday walk. The walk begins in bright afternoon sunshine, as the father takes his son by the hand. They wave good-bye to the mother, who returns to preparing the evening meal, and move off to the woods. There they listen to the singing of the birds and the sounds of nature, to which they are accustomed but for which they have never lost appreciation.

As they make their way along a railway line, they share a sensation of freedom and privilege. The father is free because it is Sunday and he does not have to work; and both are privileged to walk along the railway line, a route forbidden to others, because the father works for the railroad. This privilege is further established as a train

“Father and I”

Plot (continued)

passes by and the father signals a familiar greeting to its engineer. The narrator then notes an odd but pleasant combination of scents, those of field flowers and the tar on railroad ties. To this mixture of nature and technology the reader is offered the opportunity to add another: The narrator notes that the telegraph poles “sang”; this picks up the narrator's note of the birdsong and combines the two types of song, one technological and one natural. Up to this point everything is harmonious under a clear sky on a beautiful day.

Mention of the clear sky and the beautiful day is then followed by intimations of discord. Scanning a field of oats, the father understands the perfection of the crop, but the son, whose orientation is town life, does

“Father and I”

Plot (continued)

not. As they cross a bridge over a stream pleasantly swollen by the springtime flood, they hold hands to lessen the danger of falling through the railroad ties. A visit to the cottage of a railroad lineman, who provides them with a snack, and the father's subsequent ascertainment of a semaphore's position make it clear that the Sunday afternoon is not entirely free of chores. As they walk along a river, enjoying its beauty, the father is reminded of his own boyhood delight in perch-fishing there, an idyllic pleasure for which he now has no time. After a cheerful contest of throwing pebbles into the water, they grow tired and turn homeward.

Twilight comes on, and the woods become unpleasantly strange. The boy catches sight

“Father and I”

Plot (continued)

of a glowworm under the darkening trees, but the father does not respond to his son's reaction. Crossing the bridge again, the boy is terrified by the roaring of the stream in the dark abyss below.

In full darkness the discord becomes complete, and the father's calm is in strong contrast with his son's fear and trembling. The boy's complaint about horror in the darkness is brushed off by his father, who is sustained by his unquestioning belief in God. The boy feels lonely and forsaken and considers the invisible God to be part of the horror. This moment of alienation of son from father is dramatically punctuated by the mighty roar of a black train speeding past. The entire train is unlit save for the coal fire of the engine, in the glow of which

“Father and I”
Plot (continued)

a strange engineer, unknown to the father, stands immobile and stone-like, intent solely on plunging into the darkness. Choking with dread, the boy realizes the anguish that will be his in his movement out of the secure and real world of his father, who will not always be able to protect him, and into a life that hurtles “blazingly into complete and endless darkness.”

**“Father and I”
Point of View**

Innocent eye

“Father and I”

Conflict

- Internal
- Man vs. himself/herself

“Father and I” Foreshadowing

- When the father and son look out across a field of oats, the father understands the perfection of the crop (an orderly universe created and watched over by God). In contrast, the son, who has been raised in the city, does not (a chaotic world where there is no God).
- “It was beginning to get dark. The woods were changed – it wasn’t dark yet, but almost. We quickened our steps. Mother would be getting anxious and waiting with supper. She was always afraid something was going to happen.”

“Father and I” Theme

- The search for happiness while knowing that it is unattainable (resulting in anguish [angst])
- Religion as a form of self-deception

“Father and I” Allegory

Allegory – A way to convey meaning by using symbols, stories, etc.

“Father and I” is an autobiographical short story in which the author uses the allegory of a particular Sunday walk with his father as to convey the meaning of :

- Personal level – His first awareness of the life he was to lead;
- Universal level – Man’s/woman’s first awareness that he must search for a happiness that he/she will never attain and that will end in anguish (angst).

“Father and I”

Symbols and Metaphors

- The father – Earlier generations of men and women who had an unquestioning faith in God
- The son – Modern men and women who must wrestle against the uncertainties of life in a world where they believe that there is no God
- Darkness – The unknown
- The glowworm – Life
- The frightening glow of the black train’s fire – Intensified life