

Name: _____ Class: _____

Swarm

By Alan King
2017

Alan King is a Caribbean American, whose parents emigrated from Trinidad and Tobago to the U.S. In this poem, a speaker witnesses two boys fight. As you read, take notes on how the speaker reacts to seeing the two boys fight.

[1] In a mob¹ of school kids,
two boys shove each other
before they're on the ground.

They jab at air and grass,
[5] missing the jaw, cheek and eye.
A girl standing at the edge
screams at the boy
straddling his opponent.

Leave him alone.

[10] *This won't make me like you.*

I watch from my car
across the street
after cruising through an old 'hood,
two decades removed
[15] from my childhood.

And yet this gust spirals
the pinwheel of memory,
whirling me back to third grade,

when I obsessed² over Tia Jones
[20] the way my friends swarmed
the ice cream truck for grape Pixy Stix.

She was a sixth grader, who mistook
my lamppost legs and power line arms
for a fifth grader.



["Hive"](#) by TJ Gehling is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

1. **Mob (noun):** a large crowd of people
2. **Obsess (verb):** to fill the mind of someone constantly

[25] She was as old as the boys
throwing grass in each other's hair,
rolling around in a kind of awkward
tango towards manhood.

Watching the chubby kid
[30] overpower his skinny enemy,
I'm reminded of Darnell,
an older boy too short for Tia.

That's when I wonder
if Insecurity's³ the biggest instigator.⁴
[35] The one constantly egging you on
to prove yourself,
like that day Darnell kept asking,
Why you so stupid?

It was the day I gave Tia
[40] a Valentine's card I made
with construction paper
and magic markers.

She kissed my cheek,
her lips flipped the switch
[45] to the streetlights inside me.

Why you so stupid? Darnell said.
He shoved me. *You so stupid*
you don't even speak.

Tia's fingers locked with mine,
[50] *Let's get out of here.*

I didn't speak when he snatched her card
and tore it, when I unzipped my bag,
pulled out cleats,⁵ and smacked him.

I was a nest of wasps.
[55] Each cleat stung him
over and over.

3. insecurity is when you are uncertain about yourself or lack self-confidence

4. **Instigator** (*noun*): someone that deliberately brings about trouble

5. a type of athletic shoe that helps the wearer keep their footing

A woman's yell calls me back
across the street. It's the neighbor
on her front porch, wearing
[60] a blue tattered housecoat
and floppy pink slippers.

She holds up her phone,
and the crowd scatters,
Y'all need to stop! I got police on the line!

[65] I wish I had someone like her
to save me from myself
before Darnell's tears streaked
over welts big as bee stings.
Tia nowhere in sight.

"Swarm" from Point Blank by Alan King. Copyright © 2017. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following describes the main theme of the poem?
 - A. Boys are encouraged to fight from a young age.
 - B. Boys sometimes feel like they have to prove themselves with violence.
 - C. Kids are often pressured to fight by their peers.
 - D. As people age, they tend to regret decisions from their youth.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to part A?
 - A. "the pinwheel of memory, / whirling me back to third grade" (Lines 17-18)
 - B. "if Insecurity's the biggest instigator. / The one constantly egging you on" (Lines 34-35)
 - C. "Why you so stupid? Darnell said. / He shoved me." (Lines 46-47)
 - D. "I wish I had someone like her / to save me from myself" (Lines 65-66)

3. How do the girls' responses to the boys fighting contribute to the poem?
 - A. They emphasize that violence doesn't accomplish or prove anything.
 - B. They stress how much girls dislike violence in comparison to boys.
 - C. They prove that the boys are trying to impress the girls with violence.
 - D. They reveal how impressed the girls are by the boys' fighting.

4. How do lines 33-38 contribute to the development of the poem's theme?
 - A. It emphasizes the idea that everyone is insecure.
 - B. It shows how boys can avoid getting into fights.
 - C. It stresses the idea that fighting is harmless.
 - D. It reveals what the speaker thinks drives boys to fight.

5. How does the speaker's use of figurative language relating to bees contribute to the poem?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the poem, how has the speaker grown up since the fight he had in the third grade? How have his views on fighting changed? Do you think this is an indication of his maturity? Why or why not? Discuss a memory from when you were younger that you now have a new perspective on.
2. The speaker remembers the fight he got into, even though it was twenty years ago. Why do you think this memory is significant for him? How do you think this memory contributed to the person he is today? Describe an experience that contributed to who you are today.
3. In the poem, both the speaker and the boys he observes are involved in fights with someone trying to prove themselves. What are some of the things that you have done in the past as an attempt to prove yourself to someone else or a group of people? Looking back at that time, what are some of the different ways you view your actions today? What would you do differently if you had a second chance?