

Antaeus

A Short Story by Borden Deal

This was during the wartime, when lots of people were coming North for jobs in factories and war industries, when people moved around a lot more than they do now, and sometimes kids were thrown into new groups and new lives
5 that were completely different from anything they had ever known before. I remember this one kid, T. J. his name was, from somewhere down South, whose family moved into our building during that time. They'd come North with everything they owned piled into the back seat of an old-model sedan that
10 you wouldn't expect could make the trip, with T. J. and his three younger sisters riding shakily on top of the load of junk.

Our building was just like all the others there, with families crowded into a few rooms, and I guess there were twenty-five or thirty kids about my age in that one building. Of course,
15 there were a few of us who formed a gang and ran together all the time after school, and I was the one who brought T. J. in and started the whole thing.

The building right next door to us was a factory where they made walking dolls. It was a low building with a flat, tarred
20 roof that had a parapet¹ all around it about head-high, and we'd found out a long time before that no one, not even the watchman, paid any attention to the roof because it was higher than any of the other buildings around. So my gang used the roof as a headquarters. We could get up there by crossing over
25 to the fire escape from our own roof on a plank and then going on up. It was a secret place for us, where nobody else could go without our permission.

I remember the day I first took T. J. up there to meet the gang. He was a **stocky**, robust kid with a shock of white hair,
30 nothing sissy about him except his voice; he talked in this slow, gentle voice like you never heard before. He talked different from any of us and you noticed it right away. But I liked him anyway, so I told him to come on up.

We climbed up over the parapet and dropped down on the
35 roof. The rest of the gang were already there.

"Hi," I said. I jerked my thumb at T. J. "He just moved into the building yesterday."

1. **parapet.** Low wall around the edge of a roof or platform

DURING READING

Culture Note

The narrator mentions that T.J. speaks differently than the other boys. T.J. speaks in a southern *dialect*, which means that he says words differently than the other boys, and he may use words or phrases that the other boys do not use. Dialects can be a clue of where a person is from, because different regions often have different dialects. Authors use dialects to add dimension to a character and provide some insight as to where the characters are from.

stocky ('stā kē) *adj.*, solid, thick, and short

Note the Facts

What do the other boys notice about T. J.'s voice?

res•o•lute (re zə lüt) *adj.*, adjective, determined, set in purpose or opinion

He just stood there, not scared or anything, just looking, like the first time you see somebody you're not sure you're going to like.

40 "Hi," Blackie said. "Where are you from?"

"Marion County," T. J. said.

We laughed. "Marion County?" I said. "Where's that?"

He looked at me for a moment like I was a stranger, too.

45 "It's in Alabama," he said, like I ought to know where it was.

"What's your name?" Charley said.

"T. J.," he said, looking back at him. He had pale blue eyes that looked washed-out² but he looked directly at Charley, waiting for his reaction. He'll be all right, I thought. No sissy in him, except that voice. Who ever talked like that?

50 "T. J.," Blackie said. "That's just initials. What's your real name? Nobody in the world has just initials."

"I do," he said. "And they're T. J. That's all the name I got."

His voice was **resolute** with the knowledge of his rightness, and for a moment no one had anything to say. T. J. looked around at the rooftop and down at the black tar under his feet. "Down yonder where I come from," he said, "we played out in the woods. Don't you-all have no woods around here?"

60 "Naw," Blackie said. "There's the park a few blocks over, but it's full of kids and cops and old women. You can't do a thing."

T. J. kept looking at the tar under his feet. "You mean you ain't got no fields to raise nothing in?...no watermelons or nothing?"

65 "Naw," I said scornfully. "What do you want to grow something for? The folks can buy everything they need at the store."

He looked at me again with that strange, unknowing look. "In Marion County," he said, "I had my own acre of cotton and my own acre of corn. It was mine to plant and make ever' year."

70 He sounded like it was something to be proud of, and in some obscure way it made the rest of us angry. Blackie said, "Who'd want to have their own acre of cotton and corn? That's just work. What can you do with an acre of cotton and corn?"

T. J. looked at him. "Well, you get part of the bale offen your acre,"³ he said seriously. "And I fed my acre of corn to my calf."

We didn't really know what he was talking about, so we were more puzzled than angry; otherwise, I guess, we'd have chased him off the roof and wouldn't let him be part of

2. **washed out.** With very little color

3. **you get part of the bale offen your acre.** When T. J. farmed someone else's land, he shared the crop with the owner and was able to keep part of it for himself.

our gang. But he was strange and different, and we were all
80 attracted by his stolid⁴ sense of rightness and belonging, maybe
by the strange softness of his voice contrasting our own tones of
speech into harshness.

He moved his foot against the black tar. “We could make
our own field right here,” he said softly, thoughtfully. “Come
85 spring we could raise us what we want to—watermelons and
garden truck⁵ and no telling what all.”

“You’d have to be a good farmer to make these tar roofs
grow any watermelons,” I said. We all laughed.

But T. J. looked serious. “We could haul us some dirt up
90 here,” he said. “And spread it out even and water it, and before
you know it, we’d have us a crop in here.” He looked at us
intently. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“They wouldn’t let us,” Blackie said quickly.

“I thought you said this was you-all’s roof,” T. J. said to me.
95 “That you-all could do anything you wanted to up here.”

“They’ve never bothered us,” I said. I felt the idea beginning
to catch fire in me. It was a big idea, and it took a while for it
to sink in; but the more I thought about it, the better I liked
it. “Say,” I said to the gang. “He might have something there.
100 Just make us a regular roof garden, with flowers and grass and
trees and everything. And all ours, too,” I said. “We wouldn’t let
anybody up here except the ones we wanted to.”

“It’d take a while to grow trees,” T. J. said quickly, but we
weren’t paying any attention to him. They were all talking about
105 it suddenly, all excited with the idea after I’d put it in a way they
could catch hold of it. Only rich people had roof gardens, we
knew, and the idea of our own private **domain** excited them.

“We could bring it up in sacks and boxes,” Blackie said.

“We’d have to do it while the folks weren’t paying any attention
110 to us, for we’d have to come up to the roof of our building and
then cross over with it.”

“Where could we get the dirt?” somebody said worriedly.

“Out of those **vacant** lots over close to school,” Blackie said.
“Nobody’d notice if we scraped it up.”

115 I slapped T. J. on the shoulder. “Man, you had a wonderful
idea,” I said, and everybody grinned at him, remembering that
he had started it. “Our own private roof garden.”

He grinned back. “It’ll be ourn,” he said. “All ourn.” Then
he looked thoughtful again. “Maybe I can lay my hands on

Note the Facts

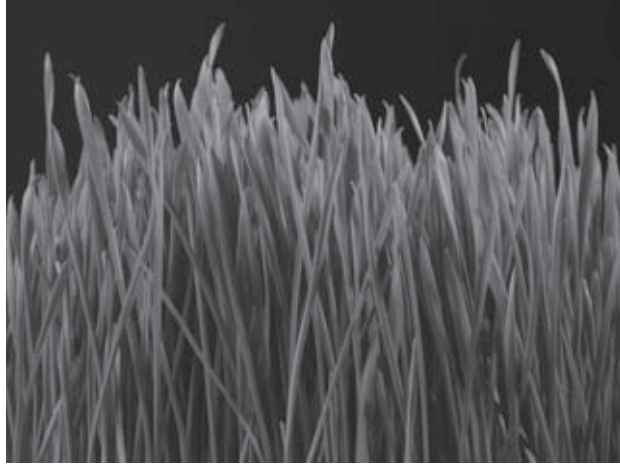
What is T. J.’s idea for the roof?

do-main (dō mān’) *n.*, land that a
person owns; rightful territory

va-cant (va kənt) *adj.*, empty,
unoccupied

4. **stolid**. Unemotional

5. **garden truck**. Vegetables grown for market



120 some cotton seed, too. You think we could raise us some
cotton?” We’d started big projects before at one time or
another, like any gang of kids, but they’d always petered out⁶
for lack of organization and direction. But this one didn’t;
somehow or other T. J. kept it going all through the winter
125 months. He kept talking about the watermelons and the cotton
we’d raise, come spring, and when even that wouldn’t work,
he’d switch around to my idea of flowers and grass and trees,
though he was always honest enough to add that it’d take a
while to get any trees started. He always had it on his mind, and
130 he’d mention it in school, getting them lined up to carry dirt
that afternoon, saying in a casual way that he reckoned a few
more weeks ought to see the job through.

Our little area of private earth grew slowly. T. J. was smart
enough to start in one corner of the building, heaping up
135 the carried earth two or three feet thick so that we had an
immediate result to look at, to contemplate with awe. Some of
the evenings T. J. alone was carrying earth up to the building,
the rest of the gang distracted by other enterprises or interests,
but T. J. kept plugging along on his own, and eventually we’d
140 all come back to him again, and then our own little acre would
grow more rapidly.

He was careful about the kind of dirt he’d let us carry up
there, and more than once he dumped a sandy load over the
parapet into the areaway below because it wasn’t good enough.
145 He found out the kinds of earth in all the vacant lots for blocks
around. He’d pick it up and feel it and smell it, frozen though it
was sometimes, and then he’d say it was good growing soil or it
wasn’t worth anything, and we’d have to go on somewhere else.

Thinking about it now, I don’t see how he kept us at it. It
150 was hard work, lugging paper sacks and boxes of dirt all the

6. **petered out.** Quit or stopped

way up the stairs of our own building, keeping out of the way of the grown-ups so they wouldn't catch on to what we were doing. They probably wouldn't have cared, for they didn't pay much attention to us, but we wanted to keep it secret anyway.

155 Then we had to go through the trap door to our roof, teeter⁷ over a plank to the fire escape, then climb two or three stories to the parapet, and drop them down onto the roof. All that for a small pile of earth that sometimes didn't seem worth the effort. But T. J. kept the vision bright within us, his words shrewd and

160 calculated toward the fulfillment of his dream; and he worked harder than any of us. He seemed driven toward a goal that we couldn't see, a particular point in time that would be definitely marked by signs and wonders that only he could see.

The **laborious** earth just lay there during the cold months, 165 **inert** and lifeless, the clods lumpy and cold under our feet when we walked over it. But one day it rained, and afterward there was a softness in the air, and the earth was live and giving again with moisture and warmth.

That evening T. J. smelled the air, his nostrils dilating with 170 the odor of the earth under his feet. "It's spring," he said, and there was a gladness rising in his voice that filled us all with the same feeling. "It's mighty late for it, but it's spring. I'd just about decided it wasn't never gonna get here at all."

We were all sniffing at the air, too, trying to smell it the way 175 that T. J. did, and I can still remember the sweet odor of the earth under our feet. It was the first time in my life that spring and spring earth had meant anything to me. I looked at T. J. then, knowing in a faint way the hunger within him through the toilsome winter months, knowing the dream that lay behind his

180 plan. He was a new Antaeus,⁸ preparing his own bed of strength.

"Planting time," he said. "We'll have to find us some seed."

"What do we do?" Blackie said. "How do we do it?"

"First we'll have to break up the clods," T. J. said. "That won't be hard to do. Then we plant the seed, and after a while 185 they come up. Then you got you a crop." He frowned. "But you ain't got it raised yet. You got to tend it and hoe it and take care of it, and all the time it's growing and growing, while you're awake and while you're asleep. Then you lay it by when it's grown⁹ and let it **ripen**, and then you got you a crop."

7. **teeter.** Wobble

8. **Antaeus.** Mythological giant who gained strength from touching Earth. Hercules defeated Antaeus by holding him off the ground until he weakened and died.

9. **Then you lay it by when it's grown.** To lay by a crop is to tend to it for the last time before harvesting. After laying by, a farmer leaves the crop to mature on its own.

la•bo•ri•ous (lə bōr' ē əs) *adj.*, produced by hard work

in•ert (i nɜrt') *adj.*, still; unmoving

Build Vocabulary

What is the most *laborious* part of making the rooftop garden?

Culture Note

T. J. is referred to as "a new Antaeus," and "Antaeus" is also the title of the story. Antaeus was a giant who wrestled Hercules in Greek myth. What does T. J. have in common with Antaeus?

rip•en (rɪ pən) *v.*, become mature and ready to be eaten

190 “There’s these wholesale seed houses over on Sixth,” I said.
 “We could probably swipe some grass seed over there.”

T. J. looked at the earth. “You-all seem mighty set on raising some grass,” he said. “I ain’t never put no effort into that. I spent all my life trying not to raise grass.”

195 “But it’s pretty,” Blackie said. “We could play on it and take sunbaths on it. Like having our own lawn. Lots of people got lawns.”

“Well,” T. J. said. He looked at the rest of us, hesitant for the first time. He kept on looking at us for a moment. “I did have it
 200 in mind to raise some corn and vegetables. But we’ll plant grass.”

He was smart. He knew where to give in. And I don’t suppose it made any difference to him, really. He just wanted to grow something, even if it was grass.

205 “Of course,” he said. “I do think we ought to plant a row of watermelons. They’d be mighty nice to eat while we was a-laying on that grass.”

We all laughed. “All right,” I said. “We’ll plant us a row of watermelons.”

Things went very quickly then. Perhaps half the roof
 210 was covered with the earth, the half that wasn’t broken by ventilators,¹⁰ and we swiped pocketfuls of grass seed from the open bins in the wholesale seed house, mingling among the buyers on Saturdays and during the school lunch hour. T. J. showed us how to prepare the earth, breaking up the clods and
 215 smoothing it and sowing the grass seed. It looked rich and black now with moisture, receiving of the seed, and it seemed that the grass sprang up¹¹ overnight, pale green in the early spring.



10. **ventilators.** Mechanisms, such as ducts or fans, for getting rid of old air and bringing fresh air into a building

11. **sprang up.** Grew very quickly

We couldn't keep from looking at it, unable to believe that we had created this delicate growth. We looked at T. J. with
 220 understanding now, knowing the fulfillment of the plan he had carried alone within his mind. We had worked without full understanding of the task, but he had known all the time.

We found that we couldn't walk or play on the delicate blades, as we had expected to, but we didn't mind. It was
 225 enough just to look at it, to realize that it was the work of our own hands, and each evening, the whole gang was there, trying to measure the growth that had been achieved that day.

One time a foot was placed on the plot of ground, one time only, Blackie stepping onto it with sudden bravado. Then he
 230 looked at the crushed blades and there was shame in his face. He did not do it again. This was his grass, too, and not to be **desecrated**. No one said anything, for it was not necessary.

T. J. had reserved a small section for watermelons, and he was still trying to find some seed for it. The wholesale house
 235 didn't have any watermelon seed, and we didn't know where we could lay our hands on them. T. J. shaped the earth into mounds, ready to receive them, three mounds lying in a straight line along the edge of the grass plot.

We had just about decided that we'd have to buy the seed
 240 if we were to get them. It was a violation of our principles, but we were anxious to get the watermelons started. Somewhere or other, T. J. got his hands on a seed catalog and brought it one evening to our roof garden.

"We can order them now," he said, showing us the catalog.
 245 "Look!"

We all crowded around, looking at the fat, green watermelons pictured in full color on the pages. Some of them were split open, showing the red, tempting meat, making our mouths water.

250 "Now we got to scrape up some seed money," T. J. said, looking at us. "I got a quarter. How much you-all got?"

We made up a couple of dollars among us and T. J. nodded his head. "That'll be more than enough. Now we got to decide what kind to get. I think them Kleckley Sweets. What do you-all think?"

255 He was going into esoteric¹² matters beyond our reach. We hadn't even known there were different kinds of melons. So we just nodded our heads and agreed that yes, we thought the Kleckley Sweets too.

des•e•crate (des' i krāt') *v.*, treat with disrespect

12. **esoteric.** Understood by only a small group of people

DURING READING

flour-ish (flur' ish) v., grow luxuriously

Note the Facts

Who is the man in the suit?
How does T. J. feel?

Use Reading Skills

Cause and Effect

What do you think could have caused the owner to come up on the roof?

Read Aloud

On pages 74 and 75, read aloud the dialogue between T. J. and the building owner. Why is T. J. so honest with the man in the suit?

“I’ll order them tonight,” T. J. said. “We ought to have them
260 in a few days.”

“What are you boys doing up here?” an adult voice said behind us.

It startled us, for no one had ever come up here before, in all the time we had been using the roof of the factory. We
265 jerked around and saw three men standing near the trap door at the other end of the roof. They weren’t policemen, or night watchmen, but three men in plump business suits, looking at us. They walked toward us.

“What are you boys doing up here?” the one in the middle
270 said again.

We stood still, guilt heavy among us, levied by the tone of voice,¹³ and looked at the three strangers.

The men stared at the grass **flourishing** behind us. “What’s this?” the man said. “How did this get up here?”

275 “Sure is growing good, ain’t it?” T. J. said conversationally. “We planted it.”

The men kept looking at the grass as if they didn’t believe it. It was a thick carpet over the earth now, a patch of deep greenness startling in the sterile industrial surroundings.

280 “Yes, sir,” T. J. said proudly. “We toted that earth up here and planted that grass.” He fluttered the seed catalog. “And we’re just fixing to plant us some watermelon.”

The man looked at him then, his eyes strange and faraway. “What do you mean, putting this on the roof of my building?”
285 he said. “Do you want to go to jail?”

T. J. looked shaken. The rest of us were silent, frightened by the authority of his voice. We had grown up aware of adult authority, of policemen and night watchmen and teachers, and this man sounded like all the others. But it was a new thing to T. J.

290 “Well, you wasn’t using the roof,” T. J. said. He paused a moment and added shrewdly, “So we just thought to pretty it up a little bit.”

“And sag it so I’d have to rebuild it,” the man said sharply. He started turning away, saying to another man beside him,
295 “See that all that junk is shoveled off by tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said.

T. J. started forward. “You can’t do that,” he said. “We toted it up here, and it’s our earth. We planted it and raised it and toted it up here.”

13. *levied by the tone of voice.* Judged by the attitude more than by words

300 The man stared at him coldly. “But it’s my building,” he said. “It’s to be shoveled off tomorrow.”

“It’s our earth,” T. J. said desperately. “You ain’t got no right!”

The men walked on without listening and descended clumsily
305 through the trap door. T. J. stood looking after them, his body tense with anger, until they had disappeared. They wouldn’t even argue with him, wouldn’t let him defend his earth rights.

He turned to us. “We won’t let ’em do it,” he said fiercely.

“We’ll stay up here all day tomorrow and the day after that, and
310 we won’t let ’em do it.”

We just looked at him. We knew that there was no stopping it.

He saw it in our faces, and his face wavered for a moment before he gripped it into determination. “They ain’t got no right,” he said. “It’s our earth. It’s our land. Can’t nobody touch
315 a man’s own land.”

We kept looking at him, listening to the words but knowing that it was no use. The adult world had descended on us even in our richest dream, and we knew there was no calculating the adult world, no fighting it, no winning against it.

320 We started moving slowly toward the parapet and the fire escape, avoiding a last look at the green beauty of the earth that T. J. had planted for us, had planted deeply in our minds as well as in our experience. We filed slowly over the edge and down the steps to the plank, T. J. coming last, and all of us could feel
325 the weight of his grief behind us.

“Wait a minute,” he said suddenly, his voice harsh with the effort of calling.

We stopped and turned, held by the tone of his voice, and looked up at him standing above us on the fire escape.

330 “We can’t stop them?” he said, looking down at us, his face strange in the dusky light. “There ain’t no way to stop ’em?”

“No,” Blackie said with finality. “They own the building.”



DURING READING

thrust (ˈθɹəst) *v.*, push with force

We stood still for a moment, looking up at T. J., caught into inaction by the decision working in his face. He stared back at
335 us, and his face was pale and mean in the poor light, with a bald nakedness in his skin like cripples have sometimes.

“They ain’t gonna touch my earth,” he said fiercely. “They ain’t gonna lay a hand on it! Come on.”

He turned around and started up the fire escape again,
340 almost running against the effort of climbing. We followed more slowly, not knowing what he intended to do. By the time we reached him, he had seized a board and **thrust** it into the soil, scooping it up and flinging it over the parapet into the areaway below. He straightened and looked at us.

345 “They can’t touch it,” he said. “I won’t let ’em lay a dirty hand on it!”

We saw it then. He stooped to his labor again, and we followed, the gusts of his anger moving in frenzied labor among us as we scattered along the edge of the earth, scooping it and
350 throwing it over the parapet, destroying with anger the growth we had nurtured with such tender care. The soil carried so laboriously upward to the light and the sun cascaded swiftly into the dark areaway, the green blades of grass crumpled and twisted in the falling.

Think and Reflect

Why does T. J. throw the earth and grass over the edge of the building if the owner is going to remove it the next day?

Analyze Literature

Narrator Do you think the narrator of this story is an adult or a child? Explain your choice.

355 It took less time than you would think; the task of destruction is infinitely easier than that of creation. We stopped at the end, leaving only a scattering of loose soil, and when it was finally over, a stillness stood among the group and over the factory building. We looked down at the bare sterility of black
360 tar, felt the harsh texture of it under the soles of our shoes, and the anger had gone out of us, leaving only a sore aching in our minds, like overstretched muscles.

T. J. stood for a moment, his breathing slowing from anger and effort, caught into the same contemplation of destruction
365 as all of us. He stooped slowly, finally, and picked up a lonely blade of grass left trampled under our feet and put it between his teeth, tasting it, sucking the greenness out of it into his mouth. Then he started walking toward the fire escape,

moving before any of us were ready to move, and disappeared
370 over the edge.

We followed him, but he was already halfway down to
the ground, going on past the board where we crossed over,
climbing down into the areaway. We saw the last section swing
down with his weight, and then he stood on the concrete below
375 us, looking at the small pile of anonymous earth scattered by
our throwing. Then he walked across the place where we could
see him and disappeared toward the street without glancing
back, without looking up to see us watching him.

They did not find him for two weeks.

380 Then the Nashville police caught him just outside the
Nashville freight yards. He was walking along the railroad track,
still heading South, still heading home.

As for us, who had no remembered home to call us, none of
us ever again climbed the escapeway to the roof. ❖



Have you ever created an artistic piece
such as a decorative garden, a poem, or a
piece of music? How does it feel to create
something beautiful?

READING CHECK

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Where is T. J. from?
A. New York, New York
B. Marion County, Alabama
C. Marion County, Mississippi
2. What does T. J. look like?
A. short and strong
B. tall and skinny
C. medium height with black hair
3. What crop does T. J. want to plant the most?
A. grass
B. watermelon
C. corn
4. What crop do the other boys want to plant the most?
A. grass
B. watermelon
C. corn
5. Where is T. J. going when the police finally find him?
A. up to the roof
B. North
C. South

VOCABULARY CHECK

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Why are the boys excited to have their own *domain*?
A. It would be a lot of work.
B. It would be a private place, only for them.
C. They could share the space with everyone.
2. Why is farming *laborious*?
A. It is difficult to work in the hot sun.
B. Farmers usually work seven days a week.
C. All of the above
3. The narrator says that the dirt was *inert* during the winter. Why was the dirt *inert*?
A. Winter is too cold for the dirt to grow anything.
B. They had to throw the dirt off the roof.
C. The dirt was very heavy.
4. The new grass is not to be *desecrated*. Why do the boys feel that way?
A. Only certain people can walk on the grass.
B. The boys do not want to ruin the grass or do anything disrespectful to it.
C. The grass belongs to the building owner.
5. The building owner stares at the *flourishing* grass. What does he see?
A. yellow, dying grass
B. healthy, green growing grass
C. new grass seeds being planted

ANALYZE LITERATURE: Conflict

One conflict in this story is over what to plant on the roof. T. J. wants to plant one crop, but the other boys want to plant something else. Write a short paragraph about what they decide to do.

USE READING SKILLS: Use Context Clues

1. When the narrator talks about starting the rooftop garden, he says, "I felt the idea beginning to *catch fire* in me." What does *catch fire* mean in this sentence?

2. Blackie steps onto the grass with *bravado*. After he sees that he crushed the blades of grass, he feels bad and there is shame in his face. What does *bravado* mean?

BUILDING LANGUAGE SKILLS: Dialect

Many words that T. J. uses are part of a Southern dialect that is a little different from the way the other boys speak. Match T. J.'s words on the left with their standard English meaning on the right. Use the footnotes from the story to help you.

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| _____ 1. down yonder | a. in the South |
| _____ 2. ourn | b. your |
| _____ 3. ain't | c. isn't |
| _____ 4. ever' year | d. ours |
| _____ 5. you-all's | e. every year |

SPEAKING & LISTENING: Narrative

After reading the story, think about what tone of voice you think the narrator would use. Together with a partner, take turns reading the first two paragraphs of the story. Pay attention to the punctuation and practice pausing at appropriate places. Choose words or phrases to emphasize. On the lines below, write down words or phrases that your partner chose to emphasize.
