The Split Cherry Tree / Jesse Stewart

Setting – The story takes place in the hills of Kentucky. It describes the life of a farmer’s family, working hard to make a living.

On such small family farms every family member (including the children) has to give a hand and to help out in the farm-chores. In the story Dave has to milk the cows, feed the animals, spread the fodder, cut wood for heating and cooking and draw water from the well. He is expected to do all the above in addition to going to school.

The story takes the reader back in time and let him experience what it was like to grow on a farm among people who live off the land.

Despite the hard life Dave's parents have, they don't sound bitter or desperate. On the contrary – they are proud of their work because they value hard work as they value education. This is why they send Dave to school. (Most children of farmers' families got only basic education, e.g. basic reading, writing and simple arithmetic.) Dave mentions that he is "the first of his people (family) to go to high school". It seems his father believes that education might give Dave a chance to make a progress and have a better life.

Analysis of the story – The story revolves around a broken cherry tree. Dave broke a tree with his friends and now must work after school to pay for it. This causes him to be late for his farm work and leads his father to pay a visit to the school, with his gun. The story introduces conflicts between the rich and the poor as well as the educated and uneducated as Dave's father confronts the school teacher. The eventual lesson of the story is not one that asserts the supremacy of any of these groups, nor Dave, the boy who is trying to navigate between them. Rather, the story shoes how open communication can explain differences and lead to resolutions.

The central conflict of the story arises because Dave does not have the money to pay for the tree that he and his friends broke while trying to catch a lizard for class. Instead, Dave must work off his debt by spending two hours after school on two separate days. This keeps him away from home, where "It took Pa and I both to do the (farm) work. Seven cows to milk, nineteen heads of cattle to feed, four mules, twenty-five hogs, firewood and stove wood to cut, and water to draw from the well". His father, Luster, works all day, and he cannot do the evening work all on his own. Mr. Herbert, the schoolteacher, did not know about life in the hills, where Dave and his family lived. "He didn't know the way the hill boys had to work so that they could go to school", and Luster was determined to make Herbert understand; with the gun that "has always been a friend to him when he goes settle disputes".

The presence of Luster's gun adds tension to the scene as he enters into an argument with Professor Herbert over the nature of education. Luster doesn't
understand "all this bug larnin', frog larnin', and findin' germs on your teeth", and he neither understands nor likes that the boys and girls are allowed to go on field trips together. What he does understand, is that a bullet "will kill a schoolteacher same as it will any other man. It will kill a rich man same as a poor man". Guns, to Luster, represent equality. A bullet does not care about age, education, class; It kills without discrimination. Yet Professor Herbert quietly asserts "I was right with these students" and invites Luster to stay at the school for a day and see how things have changed. Professor Herbert shows Luster the germs on his teeth through a microscope and teaches him about the new education Luster had been so dismissive of. Luster learns not only about germs and dissection, but he learns that his time for learning has passed, and he must trust Professor Herbert to lead his son's generation.

Dave, too, learns something from this interaction. Previously, when hoping his father would not go to Dave's high school with a gun, Dave had considered telling his father that schools had changed "from the way it was when he was a boy" but figured he would not understand. Yet, Luster's encounter with Professor Herbert clearly shows that Dave's father was not only willing, but eager to listen and learn new things. Perhaps if Dave had spoken up, his father would have listened to him as well.

These are not the only lessons taught, as the story claims that no person or group of people has the sole right to teach or is exempt from learning. Luster shares two very important pieces of information with Professor Herbert. The first is that he never kills black snakes, and he does not want to see Professor Herbert kill and dissect one. According to Luster, "they are good mousers and a lot o' help to us on the farm". He also does not harm beasts of burden because "man can defend himself, but cattle and mules can't". Luster shares these life lessons with both the class and Professor Herbert, but the next one he only tells the Professor. Professor Herbert, after his day talking with Luster begins to understand the life of a family in the hills and wants to forgive Dave's debt so he can go home to work. Luster, however, says that "We don't want somethin' fer nothin'... I ain't go much larnin' myself but I do know right from wrong", and he insists on helping Dave clean so his debt will be paid in an hour, instead of two. After a day spent together, Luster has been shown the importance of a book education and Professor Herbert has been show the importance of a life education: protecting those less fortunate and having pride in one's self.

It is only fitting for "The Split Cherry Tree" to end with Luster excitedly telling his wife what he learned at school that day. Knowledge is the victor in the multiple conflicts that arise throughout the story whether the knowledge is delivered by a teacher or a farmer; regarding biology and dissection or how to humanely treat animals. The delivery is also significant; Professor Herbert shows Luster through a microscope the germs on his teeth; Luster shows Professor Herbert family pride by helping his son
sweep. It seems that both Professor Herbert and Luster believe in education through setting an example. There are no patronizing lectures, no shouting, all these lessons are taught by example, which allows them to be a powerful force for learning rather than intensifying the conflict.

The story ends with an optimistic tone as all characters are open to study and change, leaving prejudices behind.