Love, morals, life, and death: essay examples

Literature, Poem

A Comparison of Updike’s Dog’s Death and Dubus’s A Father’s Story

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Upon first read, John Updike’s poem, Dog’s Death, and Andre Dubus’s short story, A Father’s Story, appear to have few similarities. In form, genre, disciplinary conventions, style, syntax, and mechanics, it would be easy to claim that the two pieces have nothing in common. Despite having many differences on the surface, after reading the two pieces, it is apparent that the subjects the two writers have selected have much in common; for example, the poem and the short story both deal with a death and the reactions of the people affected by the death. The writers select the most appropriate form and style for their subjects. Their content is different, but both pieces provide views about love, life, and morals in light of the death that occurs in both pieces.

The different forms of Dog’s Death and A Father’s Story are immediately apparent; Dog’s Death is a poem, while A Father’s Story is a short story. Each author selects the form that works best for his subject matter. In the case of Updike’s Dog’s Death, the subject written about is, as the title says, a dog’s death. The dog is a young dog, and her death is unexpected. The speaker says, “ We thought her shy malaise was a shot reaction./ The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver” (5-6). Updike reveals much about the dog in few words. From the first two stanzas, the reader learns the dog is young, new to the family, and has just returned from the vet for her first vaccinations. The selection of the poem form is appropriate to the subject because, like the dog’s life, it is brief. However, within the poem Updike also manages to include another important aspect, the family’s reaction to the

illness and death of their pet. They rush her to the vet, but are aware that there is little hope, the speaker saying, “ And my wife called in a voice imperious with tears” (14). It takes little time for a dog to become a full and important member of a family, and in the case of this dog, it also takes little time for her to die. The selection of the poetic form emphasizes both of these facts. The message of the poem would be weakened by long prose descriptions; all of the important moments are covered in the 20 lines of Updike’s poem.

Dubus’s A Father’s Story is a short story, its subject matter more appropriate to this longer prose form than to a poem. A simple summary of this story is that Luke Ripley’s daughter, Jennifer, is driving drunk and hits a man with her car on her way home from a night out with friends; her father finds the body but does nothing about it, and the man dies. However, these plot elements are there to serve as introductions, explanations, and rationalizations of the different relationships that exist in the story. There are current relationships, such as that of Luke and his daughter, Luke and Father Paul LeBoeuf, and Luke and God, and there are past relationships such as that of Luke and his ex-wife, Gloria. In order to understand why Luke makes the decision not to call the police and not to do anything about the man his daughter hit, Dubus describes Luke’s relationships, past and present, and how they affect him. Dubus provides this with exposition throughout his story. Unlike Updike’s Dog’s Death, the real subject is not simply life, death, and people’s reaction to it, but the effect of relationships on life and death decisions. The character’s reasoning is very complex, his action or lack of action not typical, and therefore the lengthier explanation afforded by the

short story form is appropriate for A Father’s Story. In comparison, that Updike selects the short form of a poem does not mean that his poem fails to tackle complex emotions or subject matter. Both pieces tackle the subject of death and relationships. However, more people have encountered the sudden death of a pet; therefore, Updike can afford to skip lengthy exposition and engage the reader with the immediate emotions of the event. This is not the case for Dubus’s characters because they are in a situation that readers most likely have never experienced.

The style of both pieces, although different because of form, is similar because of their use of modern language. Although people have probably been using some form of the phrase, “ Good dog!” for centuries, the use of these words in Updike’s poem reflects the common nature of the people in his poem’s speech. There are no complicated words in the poem. Updike’s intent is not to make his poem sound like a prayer, a hymn, or a eulogy. Although there are poetic devices such as an irregular rhyme scheme, enjambment, and repetition, overall the poem reads like natural speech. The poem is in the first person, a man recounting the event of the family dog’s death in a conversational tone. Similarly, Dubus’s short story, also uses modern language, a first person view, and a conversational tone. Even at the end of A Father’s Story, when Luke is talking to God, the tone is that of a modern conversation. The choice to use modern language by Updike and Dubus helps readers to relate to the subject matter. This is especially important in Dubus’s story, because Luke makes the choice to cover up what his daughter did, involving rationalization that many readers would not choose to do if they found themselves in a similar situation. Using modern

language in Luke’s conversation with God allows readers who do not agree with Luke’s decision to understand why he made his choices.

Beyond content, form, and style, the most interesting comparisons and contrasts to be made between Updike’s and Dubus’s pieces are in the analysis of the writers’ intent. One of the most significant aspects of Dubus’s writing is his theology. Literary scholar Denis Donoghue describes A Father’s Story as “ a story in which religion in the forms of doctrine, ritual, and sacramental practice is taken very seriously indeed” (2006, p. 37). Similarly, literary scholar Lucy Ferriss says, “ Dubus’s fiction is ‘ consistently concerned with an existential Christian vision of a real world in which real human beings must live’” (1997, p. 39). Ferriss also comments on Dubus’s use of the Roman Catholic convention of male-female relationships being a metaphor for the God-human relationship (1997, p. 39). A main purpose of Dubus’s story is to consider if a man can live a consistent life of love for God, love for his family, love for a woman, love for friends, and adherence to his religious and moral principles when confronted with a difficult situation.

Updike’s poem does not have the blatant religious references that Dubus’s short story does. However, to understand Updike’s purpose, readers need to realize that “ common to all of Updike’s works is a concern with individual moral responsibility and guilt” and that he is “ a consciously religious writer” (Searles 1994, p. 2172). Certainly, Dog’s Death deals with morals and guilt. In a simple way, morals are shared between the dog and her family when she receives the praise, “ Good dog! Good dog!” (4). Imagining the moral imperative of a dog may seem far-fetched or facile, but the last lines of the poem emphasize how far the dog goes to try to do the right thing, when the

people discover that even as she was dying, she “ dragged across the floor/ To a newspaper” when she had to go to the bathroom (19-20). In this moment, morals are linked to love, and it can be imagined that the poem’s speaker questions his own ability to love and be as faithful to anyone in the world with the capacity his dog possessed.

An interview with Updike reveals more about this connection between morals and love. Updike says, “ William James said it so well: Men are happy when they can believe in gods and they’re not when they can’t. Happy men perform well” (Reilly & Updike 2002, p. 237). Updike also mentions “ America’s need for faith” (Reilly & Updike 2002, p. 237). Although it is doubtful Updike would claim that dogs have religious faith or moral principles that are identical to that of human beings, his agreement with the statement that “ Happy men perform well” could apply to the relationship between the family and the dog in his poem. In other words, happy dogs perform well. She was dying, suffering, in pain, and experiencing the physical indignity of a body that betrayed her, but that did not stop her faith in her family, her need to garner their praise and appreciation. At one point, the speaker in the poem comments that his dog was “ surrounded by love that would have upheld her,” as if she somehow failed in her faith, but the family’s final discovery in the last stanza of the dog’s attempt to make it to the newspaper reverses that idea (15). Without being didactic, Updike manages to demonstrate to his readers this ultimate faith, this life and death attempt on the dog’s part to do the right thing, and to offer the question of whether or not a human being could have that much faith, that much love, morals so strong, could be that strong.

Dubus's A Father's Story presents more overt religious words and images, yet the trajectory of the story is not obvious. For example, it is not until paragraph 21 that the main moral quandary begins to be revealed, when Luke says, " She told me all of it." Even a few paragraphs later, when Luke is considering the man that his daughter Jennifer hit with her car, thinking, " if he were dead, they would not get Jennifer," it is not clear what his intentions are (para. 25). The reader is left to wonder if Luke is going to call the police, anonymously assist the man, kill the man himself, do nothing at all, or something else unimagined. The only knowledge that the reader has about Luke is what he chooses to reveal in the beginning part of the story; however, the sketch of his personal history and typical daily life is not enough for a reader to be able to predict what Luke will do or why.

In an interview with Dubus, the interviewer asks him about A Father's Story and Luke, saying, " How could he do such an immoral thing?" (Yandell & Dubus 1998, p. 103). Dubus responds, " His love for her. People will always break rules for love, won't they?" and, " I wrote it to figure out the morality of hit-and-run driving, decided to make it happen with this man of faith . . . I couldn't do that with a daughter of mine – I'd call the police" (Yandell & Dubus 1998, pp. 103-104). Dubus begins to construct the end of the story by revealing Luke's beliefs about men and women. Luke says, " no matter how many women and men too are saying these days that there is little difference between us," meaning contemporary belief in gender equality, Luke finds that the way women and men move in life very different, that they are not equals (1983, para. 15). This inequality between men and women mirrors that of the inequality between God and humanity, at least

according to the Roman Catholic faith to which Luke subscribes. Literary scholar Donoghue refers to this as Dubus's story's " saturation in the vocabulary of religion, its appeal—doomed as that may be—to the idiom of God and sin and sacrament, confession and Eucharist, and the rival idiom of father and daughter" (2006, p. 39). What Donoghue is saying is that Luke's relationship with God appears rivaled by his relationship with his daughter. However, according to many scholars and interpreters of Catholicism, women are to be submissive and faithful to men as humans are to be submissive and faithful to God (Ferriss 1997, p. 50). In other words, men are the saviors of women just as God is the savior of humanity. Luke's decision to cover up his daughter's hit-and-run accident may reflect a deep-seated belief, instructed by his Catholic faith, that as a father he is the only one who can save and redeem his daughter. This theme is common in Dubus's other works. For example, in his story Graduation, a girl loses her virginity and is sorry about it after the breakup; however, what she learns is that she can claim she is a virgin and will be believed, because it is the beliefs of others (primarily men) that create supposed reality (Miner 2010, p. 229). In A Father's Story, Luke Ripley is able to grant innocence, or at least salvation, to his daughter, as he believes only a man and father can.

Perhaps the difference between the religious backgrounds of Updike and Dubus is why religion in these literary pieces is handled differently. In an interview, Updike discusses his own background, stating that he comes from a Lutheran/Reformed Protestant religion (Reilly & Updike 2002, p. 236). He makes an interesting comparison between his Protestant background and American Catholic churches, saying, " In the American Catholic Churches,

you sense that wonderful reification: all those objects, all those statues . . . You don’t get that in Protestantism. What you wind up with are white walls and clear glass and boxed pews and sermons” (Reilly & Updike 2002, p. 236). This could be why, though Updike is known as a religious writer, that the presence of overt religious symbolism is not present in A Dog’s Death. Faith, love, morals, life, and death are strong in their presence in his poem, all of which are important in Protestant faith. However, rather than align the poem’s events with religious metaphor and ritual, the poet compels the reader to focus on the poem’s events and the meanings. This is in great contrast to the way Dubus handles religion in A Father’s Story, in which Luke’s best friend is a priest, he explicitly discusses his faith, he contemplates confession, and wonders if he should receive the Eucharist after what he did for his daughter. Religion, its symbols and rituals, are more concrete for the Catholic, and therefore they play a more overt role in Luke’s life and in Dubus’s story.

The crux of both pieces occurs at their ends. The final words of Updike’s poem, “ Good dog,” are not spoken aloud but said in the mind of the poem’s speaker (20, emphasis his). They are words that the dog likely heard many times, yet at the end of the poem when she is no longer there to hear the words, they take on extra meaning. It brings home to the poet’s speaker and to Updike’s readers what it means to be “ good” with all its moral implications, its links to life, faith, and love. Dubus’s story ends with a conversation between Luke and God, in which Luke explains his actions. “ You love in weakness,” God tells Luke, and Luke responds, “ As You love me” (1983, paras. 74-75). Luke is not seeking absolution or to find fault with God

by saying these words. Ultimately, what he is doing is simply comparing his relationship between himself and his daughter with the relationship between himself and God. As Luke said earlier in the story, that in spite of men and women believing in gender equality, he himself believes the sexes are different. Luke views this inequality as a natural way of being as it is between God and himself (1983, para. 15). Knowing and believing this, having this faith in the way of things, allows Luke to make the decision to help his daughter, just as it allows him to continue with his daily, worldly life. This is the link between the moral implications of Luke's actions and how it links to his life, faith, and love. Both Updike and Dubus successfully establish these implications and links with the conclusion of their literary pieces.

The situations that occur in Updike's poem and Dubus's short story are different; though both involve death, it is appropriate that the writers select different forms and styles to convey their messages. An initial reading brings the impression that the pieces are dissimilar, but a closer look reveals both writers' concern with the subjects of love, morals, and life. The modern language the writers use and the importance of the conclusions of their pieces offer much for readers to think about in terms of their own morals, choices, faith, and the choices and beliefs of others.

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