

# Planting a sequoia essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Dana Gioia's poem, "Planting a Sequoia" is a dramatic monologue, written in blank verse that leads readers through the thoughts and journey of a man who has experienced the death of his infant son. The speaker of the poem plants a sequoia tree in the memory of his son and this suggests the consistent tone present in the poem which is of a hopeful one. Through the speaker's comparison of the sequoia tree to his son, a significant theme present in this poem is the experience of a father in which he copes with his child's death. He copes with this death, in his own way, by placing a hope and significant value in the symbolism of the planting of a sequoia tree.

In the first stanza, readers are placed in a setting in which the speaker is "digging" a hole and "laying" someone into it and "carefully packing the soil" (line 2). This suggests the action of burying a loved one, supported by the connotation of the words "carefully" and "laying" which indicates the action is being done very consciously or in a delicate way as they handle someone who is of great value. The actions taken to plant a sequoia tree is parallel to the actions of a burial, suggesting that the sequoia tree symbolizes the speaker's son. The diction in this stanza, specifically the words, "rain blackened", "cold winds", and "dull gray" allows for the imagery of a gloomy, dark and mournful setting such as a funeral.

Also, the figurative language of "Of an old year coming to an end" (line 5) provides readers with the symbolism of death which in turn, creates a general mood of mourning and gloominess in the poem. Throughout the poem, the speaker's constant reference to "you" and "us" suggests the speaker is expressing his thoughts to or communicating with his son. A hopeful tone is recognized as the speaker wishes to still keep his son alive,

despite his death, by communicating with him and by using “ you” and “ us”, this also indicates a personal connection the speaker still feels to his son. The second stanza is introduced with the Sicilian tradition in which a father celebrates new life as indicated by the line, “ In Sicily, a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son’s birth” (line 6).

This tradition has this new father plant “ an olive or fig tree” which symbolizes that “ the earth has one more life to bear” (line 7). The olive or fig tree alludes to the Bible as these are symbols of life-long prosperity, blessing or fruitfulness. This suggests that the Sicilian tradition blesses the new born with a prosperous or fruitful life. In contrast to this celebration of new life, the speaker of the poem is not in fact celebrating a new life for “ the earth to bear” but in honor and remembrance of the “ first son” who he lost. Lines 7-10, “ I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father’s orchard, / A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs, / A promise of new fruit in other autumns” emphasizes the idea that if the son had not died, the father would have “ proudly” blessed his son with the hopes of him having a prosperous life.

The speaker ponders the idea of his son growing up to be successful as he imagines the “ green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs” (line 9). However, since the son had died, the father will not be able to bless that “ promise of new fruit” and the specific word, “ would” suggests the father then did not plant this symbolic olive or fig tree. This is also supported by line 12 where the father states that he is “ Defying the practical custom of fathers” by planting a different tree, specifically a sequoia tree, as indicated

by the title. The symbolism present can be taken two different ways in which the planting of this non-traditional tree symbolizes death rather than life or the tree itself, olive/fig tree or not, will symbolize new life of the son, but only in memory.

The diction and imagery in the line, “ our native giant” (line 11) in the third stanza creates an image of a giant- most likely referring to the grand size of the sequoia tree. This suggests that the father believes that this tree, although still a shrub when planted, will eventually become grand, living through many generations. The items planted with the tree, “ a lock of hair, a piece of an infant’s birth cord, / All that remains above earth of a first-born son, / A few stray atoms brought back to the elements” (lines 13-15) reiterates the idea that this tree is being planted in memory of the father’s recently deceased son and the tree will be a symbol of his son.

Specifically, the “ infant’s birth cord” conveys the idea of the umbilical cord which connects the baby to the mother, in the womb. The planting of this cord suggests that the father will always feel that close personal connection with his child as a mother’s relationship with the baby. A very significant shift is present in this stanza as the tone shifts from mournful to a more hopeful and optimistic attitude towards this new life. The next stanza also supports and emphasizes the fact that the father has an optimistic and hopeful attitude as the father states, “ We will give you what we can – our labor and our soil, / Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail” (line 16-17).

This suggests that the speaker will always continue to take care of the tree, in physical sense or in a deeper interpretation, it may be a metaphor for the

speaker implying that he will continually ensure the son and the memories of him will live on. The line, “ We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,” emphasizes the point that the father will continue to care for the tree. Light being an essential element to plant growth, compares to the tree growing as it is “ bathed” or completely surrounded by light. The connotation of light is very warm and optimistic and this further emphasizes that this tree, or the son, will live on in abundant prosperity from the optimistic and hopeful attitude portrayed by the warm “ light”.

Also, the alliteration present in the line, “ A slender shoot against the sunset” and the repetition of the letter “ s” in the line, provides a smooth and ease in the expression of this statement. This may suggest the smooth transition the speaker experienced as he coped with the traumatic experience of his son’s death by planting a new tree, a new life or in his determination to make his son live on forever, spiritually. Finally, the last stanza expresses the father’s desire for this tree, symbolizing his son, to live on forever even though the father has passed away, “ unborn brothers” are dead and “ every niece and nephew” is scattered.

Despite the death of the son’s family and the mother’s youth and “ beauty” disappears with age and “ into the air”, the father wishes for his son, in a spiritual sense, to “ stand among strangers” or far into the future where no familiar family member is present. The very last line, “ Silently keeping the secret of your birth” is almost paradoxical as the diction of “ silently” suggests death is opposite of “ birth” symbolizing new life. This line suggests

the son will live on forever like this tree, but will always “ keep the secret”, as long as the tree lives, of what the son’s life was like and his death.

This would be a “ secret” or unknown as it suggests by the growth and life of the tree with “ strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,” which indicates unfamiliarity that these future generations will have with the importance of this tree. “ Planting a Sequoia” is a very personal and meaningful poem as it is about the deep connection a father continues to have with his child even after their physical death.

The poem explains the natural cycle of life and death and how even though one may physically die, they may live forever through the life of another, symbolized by the planting of a tree. As the speaker’s tone shifts from one of mournful to hopeful, it again reiterates the cycle in which a life may still be lived beyond death and forever in memory and in a spiritual sense. The experience of coping with death may be difficult, but ultimately, a life does not have to end with the physical death but can continue on in a hopeful, spiritual manner beyond that death.