Vivacity in the face of tribulation

Throughout the novel, The Centaur (1963) by John Updike, the theme of self-acceptance is prevalent. The protagonist, George Caldwell, who also symbolizes Chiron of Greek mythology, struggles to come to terms with his life as it is and always looks for what he cannot have. The novel narrates his journey from a man without direction to loving father and husband. Caldwell finds himself deciding his fate and pursuing his future through the lives of others in the text. He often looks in envy at the lives of others while he fails to grasp what he has around him. Furthermore, Caldwell's understandings of the world progresses steadily for the duration of the novel; eventually finding peace within him, and in turn his environment. Updike intends to inform of the danger that lies in wishing to be that which you cannot through the development of Caldwell's character over the course of the book. The message transmitted conveys that without this acquirement of self-approval happiness is unachievable. Caldwell's relationship with Peter and his chronological development of peace of mind teach him that without accepting ones self, inner peace can never be achieved.

As a result of Caldwell's unawareness at this stage in the text, he is unable to find the beauty in his life as it is, specifically in his son, Peter. From the perspective of Peter, Updike conveys Peter's mother, saying: " in the momentum of her last cry, went to the wall and, silent through the glass tore the electric clock from its nail on the wall and made as if to dash it to the floor, but then, instead, hugged it with its trailing cord" (68). The clock and its " trailing end", serve as a metaphor to Caldwell and Peter respectively, despite Caldwell's imperfections and his lack of influence on Peter, the cord represents a final strand of hope upon which Caldwell stays connected to

Peter. The grand divide between the father and son exhibit the underdeveloped relationship that they have, and although they are distant (Caldwell is represented as a clock, yet fails to tell the time, and Peter a cord, the only thing that can ‘ save’ Caldwell and bring him to correctness), it represents a chance to progress, albeit slight. Upon the father and son’s confrontation with the hitchhiker, Peter thinks: “ My heart shrivelled to hear my fears confirmed: but my father seemed oblivious of the horrible territory we had entered” (80). Caldwell’s inability to recognize the imminent danger for Peter exhibits his complete state of oblivion. He is lost in his world of Greek mythology while he dreads his own life, representing not only his impotence as a father yet also his being stuck between religion, science and love. While Caldwell listens to the seemingly depressing and negative tale of the hitchhiker, he see’s only the good in it, stating, ““ You’re a man I admire. You’ve had the guts to do what I always wanted to do…. I was awake all last night trying to remember something pleasant and I couldn’t do it. Misery and horror – that’s my memories.” This hurt my feelings, he had had me” (84). Further revealing Caldwell’s blindness to his loved ones and the value of what he has in front of him. He rarely see’s that Peter and his wife are what should give him happiness, rather than encountering it only on other paths he could have taken and imaginary worlds. As the hitchhiker nears the end of the ride, Peter thinks: “ Up to this moment my father had failed me” (82). His recognition of Caldwell’s ineptitude until that point illustrates both a minor turning point for Caldwell as he takes his life into account yet also a block in his relationship with Peter. Caldwell’s lack of observance and absent manner severely affects his family, but he begins to indicate signs of improvement.

Despite Caldwell's blindness to the consequence of his action, he begins to distinguish the importance of those around him and take into account the value of what he has. Upon speaking with the homeless beggar, Caldwell draws positives from the chat: "'(Peter) " where are we going?' (Caldwell) ' To a hotel, that man brought me to my senses. We gotta get you into where it's warm. You're my pride and joy, kid; we gotta guard the silver"' (155). While he starts to understand his worth to the world and those around him he also finds himself leaning more towards the belief system of love, rather than science, and religion. His conclusion of being unprepared for death gives both his and Peter's lives more hope and meaning, a further lengthening of Peter's cord and Caldwell's clock becoming fixed. His father, affirming a change in attitude towards Peter, and with a stronger relationship forming, describes Peter as a precious metal. In contempt of how Caldwell placed Peter in a dangerous position, in turn he saves their relationship. Moreover, when Caldwell chats with a colleague at the school, Phillips, he states: (Phillips) " They say there is a time for everything." (Caldwell) " Not for me, I'm not ready and it scares the hell out of me" (215). Here we see further confirmation of Caldwell's revelations about his life and its implications for others. Updike then expands the profundity of this scene by having the janitor, Heller (Hades) walk by. Death's literal proximity to Caldwell is foreshadowing his brewing death yet also serves as a juxtaposition, as Caldwell has only just begun to live at this point in the novel. From this point on, Caldwell begins righting wrongs and does all he can for those around him. Furthermore, he says his goodbyes to those he is close to, as if he knew that death and his acceptance of it were coming. The ' warning' that Heller inadvertently gives Caldwell serves as a signal for the

latter to take advantage of his life and appreciate what he has. Caldwell rounds the corner between a life not worth living and a life of opportunity.

Caldwell comes to full terms with himself and those around him by the time he moves onto the afterlife. The morning after Peter and Caldwell return home, Peter begins to imagine his perfect painting:

‘“ I burned to paint it, just like that, in its puzzle of glory; it came upon me that I must go to Nature disarmed of perspective and stretch myself like a large transparent canvas upon her in the hope that, my submission being perfect, the imprint of a beautiful and useful truth would be taken”’ (283). This represents a clean slate for the family, all their arguments and imperfections have been ironed out, and despite the tragedy of his father’s death, Peter is able to find the beauty in it. Caldwell believes in only love by the end of the book and does not rely on science or religion to uphold his sanity and answer his questions. Peter is then able to take from his father both his newfound eye for beauty in all things and his virtuous attitude. In his own death, Caldwell learns to accept his life for what it was, and the path he took: “ Drawing closer to the car, close enough to see an elongated distortion of himself in the fender, he understood…. His will a perfect diamond under the pressure of absolute fear.” He doesn’t with to be anyone else or remain on the earth to fix a situation or right a wrong. In this acceptance, Caldwell dies happy, as a result of his self-acceptance. His chased peace of mind all his life only to realize that he had it under his nose the whole time. Caldwell comes to terms with the fact that life is what you make of it and no more, and all is driven by love. Caldwell comes to a complete tranquility and accepts his death, and in turn his life.

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Updike's development of Caldwell's relationship with his son illustrates how one cannot be at peace with those around them, if they are not at peace with themselves. The author reinstates the weight of family and its meaning in an attempt to give perspective. Stepping back from life and what seems to be important can often change your viewpoint significantly. Caldwell's sojourn throughout time and circumstance heeds the message of Updike and tells of the value of happiness.