

Once more to the  
lake essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

E. B. White's essay, "Once More to the Lake," ends with his feeling "the chill of death." This phrase is a haunting and initially abrupt end for the essay, especially since on first reading the essay seems to be merely a pleasant description of a lakeside vacation. With a little attention, though, it's easy to see how the essay leads naturally to a sense of death's approach or inevitability. On the literal level, White feels an actual chill. As he watches his young son pull on a pair of wet swimming trunks after a storm, he recalls the sensation of doing the same thing, and his body copies the uncomfortable shudder his son is experiencing.

But on the figurative level, that physical shudder becomes a more spiritual one, and the chill of wet trunks becomes the chill of the grave. Despite plenty of pleasant descriptions—White's father comically rolling over in a canoe, the reverence for the silent lake in the early morning, the young waitresses, the walk to the farmhouse for dinner, the pleasures of boating and fishing, the taste of soda, the laughter of other campers clowning around in the rain—little hints of melancholy and uncertainty emerge as the essay develops, and lead toward the chill of death at the end.

White seeks the calm of the lake because ". . . there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind that blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods." He embarks on the trip in part "to revisit old haunts." On the journey, White wonders "how time would have marred this unique, this holy spot . . ." and "in what other ways it would be desolated."

Once at the lake, White “ began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. This sensation persisted, kept cropping up all the time. “. . . It gave me a creepy sensation. ” Watching a dragonfly buzzing at the tips of their rods as they fish, White feels the sensation vividly. “ I felt dizzy and didn’t know which rod I was at the end of. ” White finds some comfort in the sameness and predictability of the lake—in pointed contrast to the cold changeability of the sea. This seemed an utterly enchanted sea, this lake you could leave to its own devices for a few hours and come back to, and find that it had not stirred, this constant and trustworthy body of water. ” But for all that is the same and constant, there are still unsettling differences—the horses’ track in the path to the farmhouse is gone (“ I missed terribly the middle alternative.”) Arriving was less exciting—no loud wonderful fuss about “ . . . the importance of the trunks and your father’s enormous authority in such matters . . . Wrong, too was “ the sound of the place, an unfamiliar nervous sound of the outboard motors . . . that jarred . . . and set the years moving. ” And there remains, too, that unsettling sensation of transposition. “ everywhere we went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants. The final event of the essay pulls together both the sameness of the experience and the foreboding. In the development and aftermath of a thunderstorm at the lake, there are the same sounds and patterns, the same reactions.

But it was also like “ the revival of an old melodrama,” with its “ premonitory rumble,” then “ crackling light against the dark, and the gods grinning and licking their chops in the hills. ” As the storm ends, the campers run out “ in

joy and relief” to swim in the rain, “ perpetuating the deathless joke” about getting drenched as they swim, “ linking the generations in a strong indestructible chain. ” As White watches his son take over the role of the child, pulling on the wet bathing suit, White pulls on the role of the generation before, his father’s role, the role that leads to death, and he feels its chill.