

Commentary: corkscrew



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1. 16 April 2006 Commentary: Corkscrew In this extract, the uses color, texture and temperature to evoke with vivid clarity, the landscape and characters, both animate and inanimate, which surround the storyteller. Like an artist creating a vast and majestic canvas, the writer draws the reader into every aspect of feeling, time, place and movement; in using the 'first person' he involves them in the experiences and personality of this one man.

That this is a man of few words quickly becomes apparent when he says:

'The driver felt as little like talking as I.'

This could at first appear strange, given that he is the only passenger crossing the Arizona desert, but he already comes across as a thinker, not a talker. From the rest of the piece, we the reader, are made aware of the depth and intelligence of his thoughts, getting an almost immediate insight into how his mind works.

With the image of a boiling coffeepot at the beginning, the color black is called to mind, and set against the descriptive 'shimmering heat and bitter white dust', the stark, dry, empty desert scene is immediately portrayed. The significance of water for the 'clattering machine', the tactile impact of the sand, mesas, and dusty plant life, these all invoke a thirst in the reader, while at the same time informing them that this man is observant, purposeful, stoic and keeps his own counsel. The adjectives used here are so powerful as to make us reach for a glass of water, or a cloth to wipe a sweating and dusty brow! 'Creeping', 'dry', 'dusty' 'glare', all call forth images and feelings of discomfort and heat, most of all dry heat.

Color, movement, heat and sound seem to connect man, machine and nature as the sun

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climbs, getting 'larger and hotter', so the car is climbing then sliding down, as will the sun eventually. With the introduction of gun, bullets, increased heat, the possibility of explosion emerges dramatically. The ironic humor of the storyteller 'I didn't care if we did!' (explode), brings the reader back down to earth. Further irony emerges in the sentence, at journey's end: 'A town, it was called, but village would have been flattery;...'

The words 'leaning', 'slumping', 'squatting', combined with 'shabby' and 'tumble-down' create that place, that time so swiftly and eloquently. This is a man with few words, but those he uses are of the highest quality. The absence of color, bleached from the scene, a 'white-hot Sunday afternoon', as is any vitality, 'no person was in sight', all contribute to the awfulness of what seems to be a desolate and dead place, giving little relief after such a journey. The heat and lassitude cause dismay in the reader, as the man goes on to describe the 'cooking' automobiles and the horses which 'bunched their dejection under a shed.'

But this is a man with a job to do, a determined character and despite the dusty, empty, dry and colorless place in which he finds himself, he takes steps to do that work. Once more, colors are applied sparingly but with great affect, this time to the people he finds sitting in the hotel dining room.

'Sallow', 'red ears', 'too-bright dark eyes', pale blue eyes, few words but with some further, short descriptive phrases, the people on this awful place are brought to life. The humor of the storyteller is evident in his description of the drunk's announcement. Again, his sense of irony is portrayed with 'Somebody had kept my secret right out in the open!' In the interaction regarding a room and water, the tenacity of the man and his polite ability to get what he needs comes through.

The quick, accurate and well-drawn images inform the reader that this man is intelligent, quick witted and observant of people as well as places. He is courteous and non-confrontational, but nobody's fool. He gets what he wants, and the reader can almost feel a sense of relief as dust is washed away, thirst slaked. But after washing and dressing, the business with the guns alerts us to

the possibility of trouble and once again, that this man is careful and prepared, he does not waste

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his time or energy, but he is fully aware of his environment.

The writer's purpose is to provide an insight into one man, his character and integrity and to

show this through his ways of dealing with a hostile environment, either natural or man-made. The natural environment itself, portrayed with such evocative language, is described as if through his eyes and his physical experiences. Such is the power of the descriptions that the reader too begins, very quickly, to experience everything themselves, developing an empathy with the character. His humor, irony and behavior with regard to the people he comes into contact with are quite endearing. The reader likes him, is 'on his side', this man has heroic qualities, but has let us see his down to earth nature. By the use of language, wherein 'little says a lot', we are allowed inside the man, the time and the place. We want to stay with him, to know what happens next. The writer wants us to understand and to find out more, and in this he had succeeded. This may be a short story, but it has the magnitude of one of the great American Westerns, encapsulated in perfect narrative form.