

How symbolism,
setting and
characterization
contribute to the
power of 'coalinga,...



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1. How Symbolism, Setting and Characterization Contribute to the Power of 'Coalinga, Half Way' In this piece of writing, these three elements constantly intermingle, adding to the critical incidents and the emotional strength of the story, giving it a powerful impact. With the opening sentence, the words 'edge' and 'kill' contain a prophetic symbolism, soon to be confirmed as we read on. This is a man on the edge, about to kill his life for a dream, or possibly a nightmare. The overall feeling of dread he experiences, is reflected in the situation of the animals he describes, the sadness and hopelessness of their fate symbolized by such images as:

'pathetic groups of steer stand on tall, black mounds of their own shit, awaiting slaughter.'

It soon becomes apparent that is imagery is extended to his wife, 'her big eyes' seeming to relate to the cattle's eyes. The moaning of a single cow links with her gasp, the 'horrible thud of shock in her chest, the slaughtering of the animals, the killing of her hope. Further symbolic images imply guilt, dread and destruction as the man sees pieces of garbage:

'as though they've been laid out on a steel table for his personal examination, like crime evidence.'

This man may perceive himself to be the criminal here, for what he is thinking and intends to do. The symbolic links with the animals and their fate are continued when he believes himself to be crying, just as 'the steers set up a long series of desperate bawling', then, like him drop off into silence again, as does the piercing shriek of the circling hawk. The hawk itself suggests a symbol of something circling for the kill, bringing destruction somewhere, as the man destroys his family.

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The words 'will you meet me halfway' signify much more than a drive or geographical point on a map, as does the statement, 'he knows he's gone way past halfway'. The imagery of himself as something 'deep inside a muscle' calls to mind the hypodermic needle of an addict, and

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sure enough, he is soon no longer himself, but 'some scared boy.' Words and voices, with particular reference to the telephone also play a large part in the action. The phone is both the means of unsatisfactory communication, a symbol of hope, then ultimately an instrument of destruction. The ending of the call with his wife, that 'soft click', signifies a dreadful closure, as does the image of the door clicking shut. Once in L. A., another door is closed, again via the phone. He had tried for his dream but the doors are closing. The symbolism of the fat man hitting the pool with a loud splash suggests the sinking of his heart, as the dream descends below the surface of his life. There is a close connection between the settings and the main character, where the vast emptiness, the distances, the speeding towards the bright lights, are almost allegorical. He is like the environments he travels through, the smells, sights, sounds and temperatures reflecting his emotional state. The voices and acute sounds could almost be in his own head. At San Joaquin, he dismisses the awesome sight and the history, later he denies his own 15 year history with his family. This is not a shallow, unthinking man, but his attempts to excuse his actions by blaming his own history, his father, wife's father, show him to be either a weak character of little integrity, or a man driven by some inner demon, one who cannot help what he is doing. He is prepared to sacrifice his son in the pursuit of change.

As he relates his reactions to the sights on Highland and Sunset, the frenetic
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and shallow qualities of the place do not sit easy with him, there is more dread and dismay in the setting. The hotel itself, from the 'junkie eyes' of the night clerk to the plastic curtains in the barren room, put him in an alien and hopeless place, again prophetic and linking back to the start, where emptiness of place and spirit seem combined.

His character seems to match the heat, stench, emptiness and wildness of those places on his journey. His head is hot, he feels dread, but once he has unburdened himself to his wife, his head is cooler, but he is not a happier person. He has been taken over by a wildness, reflected in the scenes

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at the start and on entering L. A. The wife is a true, sincere individual, attempting to use love, reason, duty and faithfulness to resolve matters. The lover is a shallow, self-centered individual who has been using the man, and for two years he has failed to know it, until the final scene.

There is something deeply flawed and desperately unhappy in the man's character, something unselfish and intrinsically good in his wife's, and his lover is like the L. A. scenery, shallow and meaningless. They are all, in the final analysis, just people seeking to fulfill their dreams, live their lives with some happiness. The story reflects the human condition in a dramatic and truthful manner. Its power lies in the universality of that truth.