

Example of  
comparison and  
contrast between i  
used to live here  
once and dogs deat...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



## Introduction

The theme of death is a prevalent feature in literature of all time. Since death is the ultimate truth separating man from his near and dear ones, fascination in the treatment of death by all the great authors and poems is opulently found in literary pieces. *I Used to Live Here Once* by Jean Rhys and *Dog's Death* by John Updike are two literary examples of death being at the central frame. *I Used to Live Here Once* is a short story which has a mysterious female as the central character revisiting her childhood home. That she is dead is revealed to us towards the end of story when we realize that the woman herself was not aware until the end that she was dead. If human death forms the essence of this story, *Dog's Death* by John Updike deals with the death of a young dog and the utter helplessness of human beings in the face of death. The owner of the dog tries to save it from dying by taking it to the vet but it dies peacefully in his arm. If Jean Rhys brings out the helplessness of human spirits after death in making communication with the living, John Updike shows how every effort of humans to save a beloved from the ultimate truth of life fails in front of nature. This paper will touch upon the differences between these two literary pieces by drawing a comparison and contrast between them with regard to content, form and style.

In the short story *I Used to Live Here Once*, Jean Rhys narrates the journey of a woman travelling down the familiar path across the river to a house where she once lived. She notices few changes in her familiar surrounding like the road has become wider than before, the mock summer house is not there

anymore and the stone steps are time worn. She also notices two young children playing under the mango tree. The children seem to be totally oblivious to her presence. She tries to make a communication with them saying 'hello' twice but the children don't respond. She gets near to them when she says 'hello' for the third time but the children run back to their house saying that they are suddenly feeling cold. The cold sensation that often is associated with the presence of apparitions by those who have experienced the supernatural suggests that the woman is dead and she realizes that she is dead only at the end of story when the children run back to their house feeling cold. But the children not responding to the woman could be attributed to another factor other than the woman being a ghost. Perhaps Jean Rhys used this story to express her own feelings of disconnectedness with the place she grew up in. Born in a British Colony in Dominica in West Indies, Jean Rhys was a white woman and her complexion was a stark contrast to the predominant black neighborhood. Therefore, she always felt a sense of disconnectedness with the place as her culture and root lied in England. It was like as if she was stuck in between two worlds – West Indies and England. Similarly, the woman in the story felt a disconnectedness with her surrounding because she is stuck in between two worlds. She is dead and she doesn't know it but she is unable to communicate with the living. Further, the children may not have responded to her because she was different from them. The narrator in the story emphasizes the complexion of the children, " Very fair children, as Europeans born in the West Indies so often are: as if the white blood is asserting itself against all the odds" (Rhys, 1976). This line seems to suggest

as if the woman protagonist may not be white because if she were of European descent, she would not have given so much emphasis on the white color and suggested that they are privileged (Brady, 2009).

The Dog's Death by John Updike deals with the theme of death of a dog unlike ' I Used to Live Here Once' which deals with the theme of human death. The difference between the treatments of death in these two literary pieces is in the short story, Jean Rhys describes the afterlife of death without touching upon the incidents that led to the demise of the woman protagonist but in the poem Dog's Death, John Updike describes the death of a dog without throwing any light upon the afterlife. In Dog's Death, John Updike narrates the death of young puppy who might have been injured by a car or been kicked but who is too young to express its discomfort. The dog is a female puppy and that she is young is evident in the lines " Too young to know much" (Updike, 1958). That the dog holds a special place in his and his family's life is evident from the efforts they made to save it from dying. The information about the dog being dead is communicated in the poem in the 6th line which states " The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver" (Updike, 1958). This line expresses that the dog might have got seriously injured internally bleeding to its death. But its distress and discomfort were not felt by its owners until the last moment when it was lying 'twisted and limp' under the bed of the youngest child. The owners immediately rushed it off to the hospital but on the way it died in the owner's lap. That the owners were quite attached to the dog and shared a familial relationship with it is expressed in the lines " I stroked her warm fur/ And my wife called in a voice imperious with tears" (Updike, 1958). The message John Updike sends

through this poem is just as the dog breathes its last despite being surrounded by love and just as the owners despite making efforts to save the dog from dying ultimately failed in front of the inevitable, same way death is an eternal truth which comes to all, no matter rich or poor, loved or unloved.

## **Form**

John Updike is better known for his novels and short stories than his poetry. If instead of choosing to express his feelings in a short story, he chose to make Dog's Death into a poem then he must have thought that emotions poured in this poem were better suited for a compact form. Dog's Death follows an erratic pattern of rhymes and meter without any conventional structure. The poem consists of twenty lines and there are five stanzas in total comprising of four lines respectively. The only phrase to be repeated twice was 'Good dog' which came once in the last line of the first stanza and again in the last line of the last stanza. Each line in the poem has at least ten to thirteen syllables with no definite pattern and the rhyme is erratic. Each line rhymes with the every other line in an erratic fashion. For example, lines six and eight rhyme together, " The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver/As we teased her with play, blood was filling her skin And her heart was learning to lie down forever." Similarly, lines thirteen and fifteen rhyme with 'fur' and 'her', lines nine and ten with 'fed' and 'bed', lines fourteen and sixteen with 'tears' and 'disappeared' and lines seventeen and eighteen with 'frame' and 'shame'. Lines eleven and twelve rhyme with 'alive' and 'tried' though the use of assonance (Clugston, 2010).

If John Updike used poetic form to communicate the theme of death, Rhys

used the form of short story to delineate the journey of her character. Rhys has detailed her story using third person narrator while John Updike used first person narration in his poem. Further, there was a difference in the use of plot. Rhys' short story doesn't have any definite plot that connects one event with another in a sequence through cause and effect. It merely describes a woman's journey to a place where she once lived and how she comes to terms with her own death. The story definitely has a climax but lacks a plot whereas the John Updike's poem has both plot and climax. The poem tells the story of a dog with one event leading to another in sequence of cause and effect. There was also difference in the form of both the literary pieces in terms positioning of words. Since Rhys' short story is in prosaic form, normal sentence structure is maintained but Dog's Death being a poem has an erratic sentence structure with lines split at key points to rhyme the last words of one line with another just as is done in the lines "Monday morning, as the children were noisily fed/And sent to school, she crawled beneath the youngest's bed" (Updike, 1958).

One significant difference between short story and poem is that in poetry meanings are conveyed through the use of literary devices like rhyme and alliteration whereas short stories mostly depend on symbolism, imagery, setting and character representation to beget the theme. But John Updike being an author has made Dog's Death a narrative poetry in which he has used real life imagery instead of metaphors. His sentences though not exactly prosaic have near-objective narrative elements. Lines like "The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver" or "We thought her shy malaise was a shot reaction" or "Drawing near to dissolution, had endured the shame Of

diarrhoea and had dragged across the floor" or " As we teased her with play, blood was filling her skin/And her heart was learning to lie down forever" are quite narrative in structure unlike other poems where the lines are lyrical and rhythmic. The only noticeable metaphor is found in line twelve which says " her heart was learning to lie down forever". Usually while telling dogs to take rest, pet owners use the command 'lie down' and Updike by using 'lie down' in this context puts forwards the message that the dog is inevitably dying. There is a presence of assonant words in lines eleven, twelve and thirteen like 'limp', 'twisted', 'still', 'tried', 'bite' and 'died' (Clugston, 2010). Though Updike's poem is not replete with imageries and symbolism, but that doesn't lessen its literary value.

In comparison with Updike, Rhys has used symbols and imageries to narrate her story. The first passage of the story describes a point about crossing over the river. Often death is termed as crossing over to the other world and hence the insinuation of crossing over the river is a use of magnificent imagery by Rhys to subtly inform the readers about the theme of death. While describing the author states " The only thing was that the sky had a glassy look that she didn't remember. That was the only word she could think of. Glassy" (Rhys, 1976). Rhys has used a metaphor here as glass is often associated with fragility as well as reflection. Just as glass is a fragile element which has no surety of its permanency, life too is fragile and transient and just as life helps us see our reflection on the mirror; life too makes us look back to our life in reflection of the past. There are a few imageries used to portray that she is dead. First of all, she calls out to the children who don't respond to her and secondly when she goes near them,

they run back into the house for feeling cold. The imagery of cold and chilliness are often associated with paranormal phenomena and further a body gets cold after death. So these imageries put together bring the character into an epiphany which the author sums up by stating " That was the first time she knew" (Rhys, 1976).

## **Conclusion**

Both 'I Used to Live Here Once' by Jean Rhys and 'Dog's Death' by John Updike are examples of literary obsession with mortality. Though both the literary pieces have death as central theme, they are slightly different from one another in terms of content, form and style. While Rhys used human death in her story, Updike used a dog's death in his poem. Rhys' story has an element of supernaturalism and afterlife in it whereas Updike's poem has no such things. While the content of Rhys' story seems to reflect her own sense of disconnectedness with the place she grew up in, the content of Updike's poem sends the message of inevitability of death. If Updike's poem is narrative in style with a plot connecting events in sequence, Rhys' story lacks the presence of a plot. If Updike has relied primarily on real life imageries to draw the theme of his poem, Rhys has taken help of imageries and symbolism to portray her story. Despite the differences, there is no doubt that both 'I Used to Live Here Once' and 'Dog's Death' are indisputably two highly valued literary pieces of modern literature.

## **References**

Rhys, Jean. (1976). *I Used To Live Here Once*. Sleep It Off Lady. New York, NY: Wallace Literary Agency, Inc.

<https://assignbuster.com/example-of-comparison-and-contrast-between-i-used-to-live-here-once-and-dogs-death-essay/>



Updike, John (1958). Dog's Death. Retrieved on 27th August 2013 from

Clugston, R. Wayne (2010). Journey Into Literature. San Diego, California:

Bridgepoint Education, Inc. ISBN: 1935966049

Armbruster, K. (2002). ' Good Dog': The Stories We Tell about Our Canine Companions and What They Mean for Humans and Other Animals. Papers on Language & Literature.

Brady, Terrian (2009). I Used to Live Here Once. Literary Analysis. Retrieved on 27th August 2013 from

Grecinger, Myranda " I Used To Live Here Once" By Jean Rhys: A Theme Analyzation. Retrieved on 27th August 2013 from