

# Conversation with my father essay sample



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In a 'Conversation with my father' Paley vividly presents a tragic scene of a dying father engaging with his son or daughter at his bedside and his wish to be told a story "just once more". Paley makes great use of varying narrative strategies to develop the representation of the relationship of the father and child. Through scrupulous use of discourse, dialogue, setting and narrative style and structure I think she successfully portrays the intimate yet difficult relationship shown.

The first significant thing we notice is that Paley chooses to narrate her story in the genre of the short story. One of the main generic features of the genre is to juxtapose stories within a frame narrative. This is all too evident in 'Conversation with my father' where the narration of the relationships of two sets of parents and children using an embedded story is central to the text. The frame narrative is chronological and is intermitted with a second and third story.

The irony in this story is that the embedded story is also a short story and this is used to great effect by paralleling both and using them to explore the similarities and differences of the two in stylistic and contextual terms. The ideas narration and story telling are central to the text. 'Conversation with my father' is based around story telling. The father is very interested in writing showing his knowledge of great Russian authors shown by phrases such as "Turgenev wouldn't do that.

Chekov wouldn't do that" and daughter appears to be some sort of author. The idea of writing and narrative is subtly introduced in the discourse in the opening paragraph when the daughter explains "Despite my metaphors"

when using the imagery of a “ bloody motor” to describe his aged heart. Paley uses the daughter of the invalid father, assuming the offspring is female, as her narrative agent. It is from this first person narrative with internal participation that the relationship with the father figure and the internal stories are depicted.

The father is very ill suggested by his “ last minute advice” but the daughter, although quite aware of his condition seems almost ambivalent to his dying request to “ write a story just once more”. The use of “ just once more” emphasizes the fact that this telling of stories has happened for along time also the reference to the kind of stories “ she used to write” and is one of many indications of the longevity, strength and intimacy of the relationship.

But the daughter knows he’s “ eighty-six years old and in bed” and his “ bloody” heart “ will not do certain jobs anymore” yet she answers simply “ Yes, why not, that’s possible” and this is the first exposure to the daughters apparent ignorance of his condition, not because she isn’t aware but because she herself can not accept this “ tragedy” of her fathers imminent death. This brings us to question the reliability of the narrative agent, however the discourse involving the daughter is extremely dialogue heavy and dialogue is not open to interpretation or bias, it is simply reported.

I think that the daughter deviates from the truth using not her own narration but explores this seemingly unmentionable theme of death and loss in her fictional characters and so I think the daughter is a reliable narrator especially when considering the context of the close father and daughter relationship portrayed. The embedded narrative has many functions in the

text allowing the reader to juxtapose the two emphasizing their similarities and differences in style, content and purpose. The frame and embedded stories differ very much as well as the two internal embedded stories although apparently conveying the same scene.

The frame story's style of narrative uses the first person who is internally involved in the present tense with heavy speech represented by dialogue where the second story is retrospective and in the past tense shown by the clichéd opening, "Once, across the street". The mode of representation of speech also differs from the frame story using reported instead of dialogue: "He said to his old friends, from now on, I guess I'll keep my wits about me". The narrator is very interesting in the embedded story as it is not from a clearly defined perspective.

In the initial stages of the narrative it seems we are being told from a plural first person narrator shown by "across the street from us" and "our neighbor" and this seems to represent the community as a whole as shown through "any of children who were at college or in hospital or drop outs at home". The narrative seems to change though in middle of the story to a kind of pseudo third person focalised through the mother as we find out thoughts and actions the community could not possibly know, for example "At home alone in the evening, weeping, the mother read and reread the seven issues of Oh! The golden horse! They seemed to her as truthful as ever."

The effect of these differences is to make the frame story appear much more 'real' than the embedded 'fiction' and this makes the relationship much

more believable. The father refers to this when he requests “recognizable people” and when daughter produces this female character the father immediately starts to devalue her and separate her from “real life”. The two internal narratives are also very different in their discourse although basically similar in plot.

The first embedded story is in one simple short paragraph conveying only the central ideas and bare facts in short sentences. Whereas the second embedded narrative is embellished with details in several paragraphs and intermitted with a stanza of poetry. The effect of this I think is to reinforce that this is in fact a story it is not real and can be redrafted and changed unlike these characters lives and relationships which are real and cannot, unfortunately for the daughter, be changed. I think this may be why they each find such consolation in stories and narratives.

The two stories also allow the themes exposed in the first story to be developed or destroyed, for example the hopeful aspect of the first narrative reflecting the daughter is disbanded for a more pessimistic and realistic approach adopted by the father this is shown by lack of closure in the first story trying to prevent “The End” or the fathers death and the second having closure signifying the fathers death. I think the inclusion of the embedded stories is a very effective narrative strategy Paley employs considering the word ‘death’ is not used once.

Although I have already alluded to the loving and intimate nature of the father and daughter it is evident that other issues are present in the relationship and Paley uses the embedded stories as a catalyst to parallel,

compare and explore these. I think that the father and daughter used to have a very close relationship and now although still close emotionally she does not see him as much as she used to. This is shown by the father identifying with the mother after her son left " Then he said sadly, " Number three: I suppose that means she was alone, she was left like that, his mother.

Alone. Probably sick? " This is the only time the father shows any sort of sympathy or understanding to his daughter or fictional characters this is shown by the adjective " sadly". I think the father sees the mother's situation very similar to his own. This is also insinuated in the opening paragraphs by the daughter, although it is known the story telling happened a lot in their relationship when she actually visits she can't " remember writing that way". The embedded story also allows the daughters unacceptance of her fathers death to be explored.

The decay of the " weeping" mother who could show " the ends of a person" or the potential to be resurrected to " a hundred different things in this world as time goes on" is a symbolic representation of the dying father. They both use the mother as a mode of expression which they can discuss the death. The daughter sees hope in the mothers future, that she can bring herself out of her " tragedy" and that " she could change" whereas the father sees the mothers failure as a foregone conclusion as " she will slide back".

The mother " in that store from working" represents the father alive and well, and the mother " at home in the evening, weeping" represents the father dying. This is why the daughter cannot accept her fathers ending of the story. This is perfectly exemplified by: " Well it is not necessarily the end,

Pa" " Yes" he said, " what a tragedy. The end of a person" " No, Pa" I begged him " It doesn't have to be" This extract taken out of context appears obvious that the subject matter is concerning the father's death, but this is not the case this extract is referring to the fictional mother.

The use of the verb " begged" is far too emphatic and emotional for referring to a character in a story and shows that the embedded stories are just a euphemistical mode of expression for the father's death this unacceptance is also shown by the father when he says " As a writer it's your main trouble. You do not want to recognise it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end". The embedded story allows exploration of the father's disapproval of the daughter's values and lifestyle.

He dislikes the daughters open ended and hopeful approach to life shown by his disparaging remarks to her story with a woman of presumably loose morals because she's a single mother. We can assume that the daughter's profession is of an author as her father refers to her " as a writer" and she is very interested in it but her father does not like her style as an author but is actively interested in writing. This is an unusual parallel to the mother and son who throws her life away giving her son's drug addiction permission to come into her home and life and eventually her.

The relationship although loving also has an antagonistic side to it. This is shown in the dialogue and provoked by the embedded narrative. The father and daughter agree on very little and their " conversation" soon turns from a debate, into almost an argument. The father is very stubborn and will not concede to his daughters views. The daughter for the first stage of the story

tries to appease her father as she “ promised to let him have the last word when arguing” and this is shown by the constant repetition of the colloquial “ O. K”.

However when she reveals she has a “ different responsibility” and she firmly believes the mother regains her life, we find she is just as stubborn as her father. when she contests her father with “ No, Pa” and forcibly puts her point to her him “ That’s it. She’s got a job. Forget it. She’s in that storefront working” The use of “ That’s it” and “ Forget it” is a direct contrast to her language used before in her dialogue which is frequented with weaker appeasing words such as “ could” and “ necessarily”. It is here to conversation comes to a climax “ how long will it be? ” he asks “ Tragedy!

You too. When will you look it in the face? ” This is the one of the only times the correlation between the embedded and frame narratives are openly merged with the phrase “ you too” and he talking directly to his daughter about the “ tragedy” an obvious euphemism for his death. Although an argument is ensuing the narration never indicates any sort of anger or dislike in anyway. The relationship is explored in the narrative through the aspect of the two characters age. The themes of hope and destiny embodied in the daughter are set against the themes of truth and unfortunate reality.

It would be all too easy to consider the father to embody despair, but the is not the case as he embraces his own death truthful and unmorbid fashion this is shown when the daughter writes what she considers “ an unadorned and miserable tale” expecting it to be what the father wishes but he replies “ But that’s not what I mean” showing he just wants the realistic truth. These



themes directly reflect the stereotypical ideologies of the two ages portrayed; where naive youth is full of vitality, hope and positive prospects for the future and the aged are cynical, embittered and realistic.

The theme of hope from the daughter is directly introduced by her emphatic statement “ but because it takes all hope away. Everyone real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life”. The theme is developed within the first embedded narrative, even though this poor woman is thought of in “ disgust” by her son and lives “ hopeless and alone” the daughter injects some hope with “ We all visit her”. The use of the plural “ we” again showing perhaps the community gathers round her and the “ all” suggesting she maybe has a lot of friends of whom everyone comes to comfort her.

The daughter also finishes the story with a lack of closure, as most short stories generically do this also promotes a feeling of hope that this woman still has the “ open destiny of life”. In her final argument with the father she persists with the theme always trying to retain some hope she explains to her father about the fictional mother’s situation “ it is not necessarily the end, Pa” and “ it doesn’t have to be”. The daughter becomes more and more adamant and determined until finally totally disagreeing “ That’s it.

She’s got a job. Forget it. She’s in a store front working”. The development of the cynical realism of the father is depicted by his lack of respect for the hopeful first draft of the short story. Under his influence the story is completely transformed and takes all hope away. It is interesting that the daughter, trying to appeal to her fathers’ narrative tastes includes closure in

the second draft by the addition of “ The End”. This is noticed and praised explains her father “ The end. The end. You were right to put that down.

The end” the repetition of “ The end” here emphasises and develops the significance of the father truthful and realistic stance in life and reinforces the closeness to his own death. The age difference is also explored by values of the two and eras they both lived in. The daughters’ story includes references to drug taking with modern nouns such as “ junkie”, independent single mothers living alone with children born out of wedlock. The father shows his age by comparing this family to a typical nuclear family by asking “ what about the boys father? and by his exasperations about the woman living in sin “ For Godsakes, doesn’t anyone in your stories get married? Doesn’t anyone have the time to run down to city hall before they jump into bed? ” She writes about modern and fashionable Manhattan with “ intellectual” and “ artistic” characters. The embedded story very much focuses around “ youth culture” with references to “ revolutionary” ideas. This comes from the daughter reinforcing her youth and father disagrees with this story and again shows his age. The fathers age is shown through his old fashioned view of the unmarried mother.

His age is also depicted in the discourse as he “ had been a doctor for a couple of decades and then an artist for a couple of decades” showing he has had two careers both of several decades. The father’s reference to the traditional in terms of story telling, he uses the term “ historical tragedy” which is an old fashioned story genre. The narrative conveys age both directly such as “ My father is eighty six years old” and indirectly through

theme and word association and I think is effective mode for showing parts of the relationship.

The setting Paley employs is minimal but very effective. In fact the setting of the frame story is mentioned only once but Paley structured this well, including her only reference to the setting at a time where it would be most emphatic and effective also considering the frame story is so dialogue heavy the inclusion of descriptive prose interrupting it is also significant. The father is trying to explain the “tragedy” of “the end of a person” and not listening to his daughters retort about a character in her story he explains “In your own life, too, you have to look it in the face”.

This is just one example of the frame and embedded stories briefly amalgamating and further evidence of the daughter using her stories euphemistically. It is at this critical point of the father trying to make her face the reality of his death that the setting is briefly exposed: “pointing to the dial of the oxygen tank” he had to “insert tubes in his nostrils and breathed deep”. This reinforces the situation of the fathers’ critical state embodied in actual physical distress and interrupting the dialogue at such a poignant time and gives us tangible evidence of his condition.

I think the fact that Paley omits the setting almost completely is not negligence on her part but very effective stylistic choice. As the narrator is first person we are told the story as she wishes to tell it and the lack of description only goes to further enforce her attention and care for her father that the setting, while rationally very important is failed to be mentioned.

When it is mentioned it is only because it is essential to the narration but the description is very brief and the continuation of the heated dialogue ensues.