

Ralph the duck essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Vomit. It's neither pretty to see nor pretty to clean up. "Ralph the Duck" begins with the retching sound of the narrator's golden retriever being sick on the carpet. As the narrator, who goes unnamed throughout the whole story, "carries seventy-five pounds of heaving golden retriever to the door and pours him onto the silver, moonlit snow" (1), he thinks to himself, "He loved what made him sick" (2). We learn the dog vomits because he has been eating the rotting carcass of a deer, which he continues to go back to, night after night. Through the dog we see the correlation to the narrator's current destructive lifestyle.

Like the dog, the narrator shows an apparent lack of concern for his own health. He seems to have little energy, most likely due to the fact that he doesn't sleep well. Several times throughout the story he consumes large amounts of alcohol. He has a "king-sized drink composed of sourmash whiskey and ice" (10) with dinner, while driving at work he has a thermos of sourmash and hot coffee and one morning he starts on a wet breakfast. This would symbolize the fact that the narrator is imposing his condition upon himself. He is bored with his life, bored in his marriage and bored with his job. After the death of his infant daughter he seems to feel no joy in life. Frederick Busch writes "Ralph the Duck", to explore how a man numbed by the pain of having a child die and a crumbling marriage can still experience a renewal of self-worth through his heroic actions in saving the life of a suicidal girl. This act helps him lose his feeling of helplessness and despair he has held onto since seeing his own child die and not being able to save her.

His relationship with his wife, Fanny, is strained. They both seem to be going through the motions of day-to-day living and are emotionally numb in the

aftermath of the sudden death of their infant daughter. Fanny reminds him of what he used to be. More specifically, when he sees and talks to Fanny, the narrator remembers his daughter and the life he had before her death. A life that was filled with joy for both himself, his wife, as well as their young daughter. They were so in love with their daughter and thrilled to be parents. This would explain why, after the death, he is so distant when speaking to his wife- when he does speak to her at all. She sleeps on the couch one night and the next morning he thinks “ she will forgive me if I hadn’t been too awful – I didn’t think I’d been that bad” (2). The narrator even falls asleep on a date to the movies with Fanny. He reflects, “ I fell asleep, and I’m afraid I snored” (45).

Still, Fanny respects him for taking college classes at night. Working at the college as a security officer gives the narrator the fringe benefits of being able to attend one class per semester free of charge. He calls himself the “ oldest college student in America” (4) even though he realizes that he isn’t. He feels like it, taking one class at a time, “ getting educated, in a kind of slow motion way” (4). This semester he is taking an English class and his professor represents to the narrator people’s views of Vietnam War veterans and how they view them as killers and damaged. The professor writes on one of his papers, “ You are not an unintelligent writer” (5). The narrator obviously loathes the professor and makes fun of him throughout the entire story.

When he has to jump start the professor’s car, the narrator thinks to himself, “ But he couldn’t get a Buick going on an ice-cold night, and he didn’t know enough to look for cells going bad” (4). After the narrator turns in another

paper the professor asks to speak to him. He tells the narrator, " You just don't say fuck when you write an essay for a college prof. Okay?" (28). When asked in the next assignment to write an essay that will influence someone, the narrator turns in a story called " Ralph the Duck", a delightful bedtime story obviously invented for his little girl. The professor, not surprisingly, is more mystified than swayed by the tale of a featherless duck, and he receives a D.

The narrator's thoughts when he is around the professor also show that he is often reminded of the Vietnam stereotype. For instance, the narrator thinks, " Slick characters like my professor like it if you're a killer or at least a onetime middleweight fighter" (8). Another example of the narrator making fun of the Vietnam stereotype is when he thinks, " I figured I should have come to work wearing my fatigue jacket and a red bandana around my head". Say ' Man' to him a couple of times, hang a fist in the air for grief and solidarity, and look terribly worn, exhausted by experiences he was fairly certain he envied me" (44).

One night the narrator encounters a red-haired girl standing in the snow without any shoes on, in just a bathrobe. She is clearly distraught and claims that " He doesn't love anyone...his ex-wife, or the one before that...and he doesn't love me" (11). The narrator takes her to the dean's house and thinks that " she is beautiful and she was someone's red-haired daughter, standing in a quadrangle how many miles from home weeping" (10). The girl reminds the narrator of the daughter he once had. Evidence of this when the narrator thinks, " I thought of her as someone's child, which made me think of ours, of course" (21). He suspects that the girl is having an affair with his professor

after noticing that she shows up at the professor's office and the professor calls her his "advisee" with a sly grin. After witnessing this he calls in sick for work and goes home, which is something he doesn't normally do. He is feeling a fatherly rage at the professor for having an affair with the red-haired girl and even more disheartened than usual.

The next time he has an encounter with the girl is on the same day he gets the D on the assignment in Rhetoric and Persuasion (when he had turned Ralph the Duck). It is a wretchedly cold day, the worst of this year's storms and one of the worst they've had in years. The college has closed, which it almost never does, and a freezing rain has started to fall. The narrator feels as cold as the weather. He is going about his tasks mechanically, trying to warm up with his thermos full of coffee and sourmash. A report comes over the radio in his work truck that someone's roommate, who had been taking pills, was headed for the quarry. At risk to himself, the narrator grinds the truck the narrow track to the quarry, bucking snow and sliding on the road.

Once there he sees the red-haired girl in a white nightgown. She is wobbling, with a stomach full of pills, out in the cold, freezing herself to death. She is perched precariously four or five stories up on the quarry. Her skin is mottled purple from the cold and he is furious with her. "I didn't want her to see how close I might come to wanting to kill her because she wanted to die" (90). He talks to her about dying and how he remembers the dead bodies he has seen in Vietnam and how horrible the memory is to the ones left behind. He dreams about his little girl often, which is why he doesn't sleep well, and doesn't want to dream about this little girl also. She tells him she just wants to go to sleep, that she is serious about dying and hopes that he remembers

her. He is feeling frantic, remembering his little girl and her death. To his relief he is able to get her in the truck. As he races back down the hill to the hospital he checks her several times to make sure she is still breathing. Her breath is shallow and she is very cold and fading fast.

He talks to her about his daughter and how they lost her. As he bravely races down off the mountain, he bounces the truck “ off a wrought iron fence to give me the curve going left that I needed. On a pool table, it would have been a bank shot worth applause” (120). He feels desperate to get to the hospital in time, before it is too late. He roars up to the emergency room entrance with a police escort where they snatch her from his arms. They make him sit down because he is shaking so bad in the aftermath of his adrenaline rush and fear. He keeps saying, “ Don’t let her die”, (24) and “ She better not die this time” (132). This is very important, because it is almost as if the narrator has a second chance at saving his daughter.

Later, at home, he is at the northern windows looking for the sun to come up. He is looking for the fresh beginning of the day as he is hoping for a new beginning in his life. Fanny asks him how he talked the girl out of the quarry. He says he just told her stories. He downplays his heroic role in saving the girl’s life, but he knows he has had a second chance. He has saved someone else’s daughter when he couldn’t save his own. Through this action he has put his life on a path to self-healing.