

Once more to the  
lake analysis



The concept of memory reveals a tension between past and present, as memory spans days, years, and decades, resurrecting the past as an integral part of the present moment. In E. B. White's essay "Once More to the Lake," a father struggles with an internal conflict between the present and the past, and between memory and reality. Through the use of contrasting stylistic elements, as well as synchronization and repetition, the father's insistence that "there had been no years" (446) blurs the line between his memory and his experiences with his son, altering the very concept of time itself.

White first generates an impression of dichotomy in his essay through the contrasting of two tones, one tense and the other tranquil. When relating his previous vacations, White uses phrases of quietude, describing the lake as having "the stillness of the cathedral" (445) or of appearing "infinitely remote ..." (445). His choice of "stillness" and "cathedral" implies a sense of awe and reverence for the lake, while "infinitely remote" accentuates the sheer magnitude of the lake's serenity.

However, when describing the present, White jolts the reader with a conflicting tone of unease, made even more abrasive by its juxtaposition with the peaceful tone: "I wondered how time would have marred this unique, this holy spot..." (445). Here, the narrator pauses after unique, underscoring the religious word, "holy." However, this emphasis mixes apprehensively with the jarring verb "marred." The friction between tones of tension and release reflects the narrator's allegation that "there had been no years" (446), a seemingly impossible avowal made true by the disparity between past and present.

The abrasion between the two tones emphasizes this contrast. This friction between the present and the past further reveals itself through White's pairing of concrete and abstract images. One of the most important instances of this combination occurs as the father observes a dragonfly with his son. The narrator states " I lowered the tip of mine [fishing rod] into the water, tentatively, pensively dislodging the fly, which darted two feet away, poised, darted two feet back, and came to rest again..." (446). Here, White's use of " dislodging," " darted," and " poised" convey a concrete image of the dragonfly's antics.

However, White immediately contrasts this tangible image with a more abstract concept: that " There had been no years between the ducking of this dragonfly and the other one - the one that was part of memory" (446). This juxtaposition of the concrete and the intangible creates a feeling of imbalance in time - the sensory experience of the dragonfly, when paired with the abstract expression " there had been no years" blurs the line between memory and the present, distorting the distinction between the father's previous vacations at the lake and his current experiences with his son.

This pairing of concrete imagery with abstract concepts provides a context for White's critical use of repetition. The all-important refrain, " There had been no years" first appears in his concrete description of the dragonfly: " It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and that there had been no years" (446). The narrator's absolute certainty and the

tangible “ arrival of this fly” contrast with the intangible image of the “ mirage,” setting up the first of three repetitions.

The second repetition appears amidst another contrasting of the concrete and the abstract: “ There had been no years between the ducking of this dragon fly and the other one - the one that was part of memory” (446).

Again, the concrete image of “ ducking” contrasts with the formless concept of “ memory. ” The final repetition culminates in a third juxtaposition: “ the water felt thin and clear and unsubstantial. Over the years there had been this person with the cake of soap... and here he was.

There had been no years” (446-447). In this final repetition, White uses coordination to set up a sensation of flowing from concrete to abstract, from “ thin” to “ clear” to “ unsubstantial. ” The conjunction “ and” links these words together, adding emphasis on each subsequent word and accumulating the energy of the paragraph onto the image of the cleansing person, a symbol of rebirth through the years. A final “ and” builds to the simple use of a linking verb: “ and here he was. In this one moment, the narrator is critically aware of time and his place in it. Placed at the end of a paragraph, alone in a sentence, his final repetition that “ There had been no years” represents the culmination of the tension between present and past in the first part of the story. Through contrasting elements, and most importantly repetition and coordination, E. B. White’s “ Once More to the Lake” creates a friction between experiences in the present and in the past.

White’s pairing of opposing tones and images blurs the boundary between memory and the present, providing the context for the repetition of the key

phrase “ there had been no years. ” Thus White’s essay distorts the very concept of time itself, enabling memory and the present to coexist in the mind of the story’s narrator. In “ Once More to the Lake,” White permits the past and the present to exist not separately, but simultaneously.