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Necessity vs. Selfishness

Robert Frost’s insightful, yet tragic poem, *“Out, Out-”,* employs realistic imagery and the personification of a buzz saw to depict how people must continue onward with their lives after the death of a loved one. It also hints at the selfish nature of humans who often only show concern for themselves. The poem narrates the story of a boy who dies by accidentally cutting off his hand with a buzz saw in his own yard. Frost employs imagery to reveal the setting, which is the boy’s yard in Vermont right before sunset, using vivid detail to describe the five mountain ranges of which are within eyesight of the yard.

The narrator foreshadows the tragic event to come when he wishes that the workers would have called it a day and given the boy the half hour that he counted on so much when he was saved from the adult responsibility of cutting wood with a buzz saw. While nothing was happening, the boy’s sister came out to tell him and the other workers that supper was ready. The boy, who was excited at the signal of the end the day’s work, accidentally cuts himself with the treacherous buzz saw. Frost reveals a sense of the boy’s pain by employing the oxymoron “rueful laugh” which displays both the boy’s extreme surprise and deep sorrow at the amputation of his hand. Frost continues to depict this shocking scene by describing the boy’s reaction as he “[holds] up the hand, half in appeal…half as if to keep the life from spilling” from his body. The adult responsibilities the boy had been faced with, combined with the horrific mangling of his own hand, led to the boy’s own terrible revelation that all will soon spoil. This foreshadows the next tragedy, the death of the boy.

Frost utilized dialogue to convey the boy’s pleading voice as he begged his sister not to let the doctor cut off his hand. The syntax Frost chose was specifically selected to reflect the boy’s life as it began to diminish. Compared with the first few lines of the poem, the concluding ones consisted of short, choppy sentences as death closed in on the boy. The doctor arrived and gave the boy ether, an anesthetic, after which Frost described the boy’s breathing as shallow and weakened while he “lay and puffed his lips out with his breath”.

Frost paints such vivid images with his words that the reader can almost see as “the watcher at (the boy’s) pulse…[listens] to his heart”1 as the beating fades from “little” to “less” to “nothing”, which ends the boy’s life. The theme does not become clear to the reader until the last sentence, which depicts how the family and friends “[are] not the one dead”2, so they “turn to their affairs”2, and proceed on with their lives. Frost conveys the necessity of how people must go on, even after a tragedy such as the death of a loved one because life continues and so must they. Even though going on with life is a necessity, the speed in which the family and friends proceed to do so causes the reader to wonder what their motives are; necessity or selfishness. Frost personifies the buzz saw so that it seems to come alive with a will of its own. The phrase “snarled and rattled”3 repeats three times throughout the poem to depict an image of the buzz saw whirring back and forth. At times “it [runs] light, or [has] to bear a load”4, which conveys the saw as a living being that must carry something. Frost gives the buzz saw an ominous air, a will of its own, when it “leaped out at the boy’s hand”5, “as if to prove saws [know] what supper [means]”6. In this way, Frost shies away from the fact that the boy brings death upon himself by getting momentarily distracted from cutting the wood, accenting blame on an inanimate object. Along with faulting the buzz saw, the reader can also cast blame on the parents for making the boy, “a child at heart”7, take on adult responsibility to “doing a man’s work”7, which results in a freak accident and ultimately, the boy’s death.

In *“Out, Out-”*, realistic imagery and the personification of a buzz saw furthermore convey Frost’s theme of how we as human beings must continue onward with our lives even in the face of tragedy, along with hinting at the selfish nature of humans, who tend to only be concerned for themselves.

Works Cited

Frost, Robert *“Out, Out—”,* McMahan, Day, Funk, and Coleman *Literature and the Writing Process*: Pearson, 2014. Page 613

1. Line 30
2. Line 34
3. Line 7
4. Line 8
5. Line 16
6. Line 15
7. Line 24