



Sample Essay

A reaction paper on Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor

A Country Doctor is an intense story of a doctor attending to an emergency. It starts with a description of the agitations of the doctor as his horse has died overnight, heavy snow lies on the ground with more falling, and his servant girl Rose cannot find any villagers willing to lend him a horse for the visit. It then descends into abstract bleakness: the groom who mysteriously appears out the pigsty after the doctor kicks its door in sheer frustration and his terrible intentions towards Rose; the patient, a young boy who is seemingly well but it then transcends has a fatal and diseased flesh wound; the doctor's destiny at the end of the book. Kafka does not offer the reader escapism; A Country Doctor is no exception.

In the nightmarish situation the doctor finds himself in, he is presented with challenges both tangible and intangible. The four main trials for the doctor, however, are winter, the groom, the patient and himself.

The doctor is tense and anxious at the start of the book. The short, sharp, broken sentence structure serves to highlight his frustration and as you read the opening seven lines, you can sense him pacing, back and forth, back and forth. He is unwilling to help himself, though, and is portrayed as ineffective. It is Rose, the servant girl, who is busy searching for a replacement horse for him while he worries: "...but it was hopeless, I knew it, and I stood there forlornly...of course, who would lend a horse at this time for such a journey?" Even when his luck unexpectedly turns after he kicks the pigsty door in frustration he "did not know what to say". Again, it is Rose who deals with the situation by making a joke and relieving the tension. Later on, when he is with the patient and fretting about Rose's fate, he decides he needs to return as the horses have somehow become loose but he has no conviction and he permits the patient's sister "to take my fur coat from me". And it is not long before he "yields" and drinks from the rum he has been given.

He has not even the strength of conviction to check his patient properly. He had already decided the young boy was fine before confirming "what I already knew; the boy was quite sound". He is blinded by his broken spirit and believes the boy asked him to let him die because he is apathetic and disinterested in life. He is eaten up by the sacrifice he has made by choosing between Rose and the patient, and by the

ingratitude of his patients generally – “the whole district made my life a torment with my night bell” – and cannot see that his patient is literally eaten up, by the maggots in his flesh wound. Upon discovering the wound, the doctor is faced by another defeat: “Poor boy, you were past helping.” The doctor feels “betrayed” – by the winter, the groom, science, his community, and his own mortality and loss of control as a result of old age.

The groom is symbolic and represents the doctor’s shortcomings. The doctor is treated like a god by his patient who pleads with him to let him die, implying he has the power to make this happen, and yet he cannot control the groom. A scientist who is used to life and death decisions makes mistakes when confronted by the brutality of the groom, telling Rose to “give him a hand” and the “willing girl” hurries to help, only to be bitten on the cheek by him. It is as though the doctor is sacrificing Rose unintentionally and then consciously - in order to get the horses: he starts to stand up to the groom but then stops as “of his own free will he was helping me out when everyone else had failed me”. Despite the groom’s arrival on the scene, mysteriously being in the pigsty with the “enormous creatures”, and his obvious sexual intentions towards Rose, the doctor has no choice but to send Rose to her fate. He is faced with a moral dilemma: rescue Rose or save his “seriously ill” patient, which is his duty as a doctor. In fact, the decision is quickly snatched away from him by the groom who states his intentions, “I’m not coming with you anyway, I’m staying with Rose”, and then orders the horses to “Gee up!” taking the doctor away and leaving Rose helpless and at his mercy.

The horses transport him the ten miles to his patient in “a moment”. Before he knew what had happened – that the groom had knocked the house’s door down to capture his prey, to have his wicked way with poor Rose – he had arrived at the patient. The doctor descends at this point into a dream-like state – or rather, the nightmare continues. This is not the first time the doctor has no control over his decisions, almost as if destiny is dictating his every move. The weather has already robbed him of his horse overnight, “worn out by the fatigues of this icy winter”, presenting a real challenge for him.

The patient represents the doctor’s failings – he is unable to help him. Despite the enormity of sacrificing Rose, the patient is beyond the help of science. It is as though the doctor realises he can no longer rely on science. The patient can also be described as a challenge for the doctor as he is the catalyst for the whole nightmare – after all, it is because of his alarm call that the terrible events are set in motion.

The story is a nightmare. The pace of the book makes you feel anxious – the structure is incessant and overwhelming as the only time there are breaks in the block of text are for the two small songs. We experience the feeling of being trapped, just as the doctor does; we are forced, propelled to read on, just as the doctor is forced, propelled to carry out his duty. The doctor has no respite, his challenges are relentless. He is not allowed to forget the fate of Rose. Not only does he torment

himself and constantly berate his decision (“I had to see that Rose was all right...and I wanted to die too”) but nature itself taunts him – the patient’s wound is twice described as “rose-red”. The imagery conjures up horrors and atrocities which the groom has undoubtedly performed. In addition, the imagery forces the doctor to admit he cannot help him. The patient’s wound, “this blossom in your side was destroying you”, is a reminder that we all die – we all return to nature. The doctor calls it the “blossom” because he knows out of the patient’s death will come new life (Brancato, J., 1978). Nature is a constant cycle and one that science cannot stop.

The alien nature of the horses and groom also belong to a nightmare. Their departure from the pigsty is like something from ancient mythology: “...enormous creatures with powerful flanks...their legs tucked close to their bodies...squeezed out through the hole...But at once they were standing up...their bodies steaming thickly.” These are no ordinary horses. They gallop off at the mere utterance of a command and a clap of the hands; they glide the doctor to his patient as he is “deafened and blinded”; and yet on the return journey they become slow “like old men”.

A Country Doctor is more than a tale of one man’s “betrayal”; it is about mankind and his insurmountable obstacles. Nature battles with the doctor throughout and wins: nature kills his horse; nature makes the journey hazardous; nature kills the patient; and nature ultimately destroys the doctor. The vulnerability of us all is laid bare, even an experienced doctor is not in control. The moral dilemmas which we all face, especially those in positions of responsibility, are highlighted – the doctor has to make a choice between a “seriously ill” patient and his servant Rose. One may be very ill and the other healthy but both are innocent; as a doctor, the Hippocratic Oath will further complicate his moral decision – and in the end he has to be true to his profession.

At the time of writing A Country Doctor, Franz Kafka believed it would be his last book (Pawel, E., 1988). Perhaps this explains the similarities which can be drawn between the Doctor and Kafka himself: the terrible change in the Doctor, one that cannot be undone and one that he is powerless (or so he feels) to prevent; and Kafka’s upbringing which created feelings in him of being “unfit for life among the living” and that he “was an absolute Nothing” (Pawel, E., 1988).

Kafka is the ultimate challenge in A Country Doctor: he will not let the reader walk away from this tale. Just as the doctor cannot escape his nightmarish predicament, cannot reach home, we too are left in the book’s nightmarish grip. We have no choice but to ponder on the difficult themes of the book and, ultimately, just what is means to be human.

Sources

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Brancato, John J. "Kafka's 'A Country Doctor': A Tale for Our Time." Studies in Short Fiction 15:2 (1978) p. 173