

Weighing the Options

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Assignment: Short Story Evaluation

Chocked full of suspense, drama, images, and various other escapes, short stories are a way to briefly vacation into another time and place without leaving home. They can leave endings up to the reader to decide, or answer everything, in a matter of a few pages. Covering any range of themes, there is probably a short story to suit every person's taste in literature. With so many different styles, there must be a way to determine which short stories rise above the rest. Evaluations of short stories can become abstract unless the person analyzing them uses concrete evaluation criteria. Examples of criteria suitable for evaluating short stories include, the parts of a short story (exposition, rising action, climax, and final resolution), conflict, imagery, personification, and types of narrators. I chose to evaluate Tim O'Brien's "On the Rainy River" and Pam Houston's "A Blizzard under Blue Sky" based on the criteria of imagery, types of conflict, and final resolution.

Imagery, by definition, is "[the] use of language in literary work that evokes sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or 'concrete' objects, scenes, actions, or states, as distinct from the language of abstract argument or exposition" (Baldick 106).

Personally, for me to enjoy a short story, I need detailed imagery. This allows me to immerse myself in the story I am reading and understand more thoroughly what the character(s) think or feel, or what they are experiencing from their outside environment. As I read, I am capable of painting vivid images in my mind and am able to identify with the character(s) in the story. A lack of imagery makes a short story dry, and I am not able to maintain interest as easily.

O'Brien's "On the Rainy River" has such detailed imagery. For example, becoming an employee in a meat packing plant is not a difficult task when the cleaning process is described by O'Brien: "As a carcass passed by, you'd lean forward and swing the gun up against the clots and squeeze the trigger, all in one motion, and the brush would whirl and water would come shooting out and you'd hear a quick splattering sound as the clots dissolved into a fine red mist" (93). This graphic description provides the sights and sounds and a general feeling of what it is like to work in the facility, cleaning meat to ready it for butchering. When the main character undergoes a mental breakdown, O'Brien described the experience as, "Down in my chest there was still that leaking sensation, something very warm and precious spilling out, and I was covered with blood and hog-stink, and for a long while I just concentrated on holding myself together" (94). This evoked sympathy from me as a reader and a desire to want to comfort the man and offer support. "On the Rainy River" is so vividly written, there are no gaps left to be filled in by the reader. The pictures are readily painted out by the author.

Imagery contained in "A Blizzard Under Blue Sky" is also detailed enough to give the reader mental pictures of the scenery in the story. The snowy woods are described by the character on her winter camping trip in a way that almost makes the surrounding air feel cold. Houston writes, "There are not too many good things you can say about temperatures that dip past twenty below zero, except this: They turn the landscape into a crystal palace and they turn your vision into Superman's" (240). This description depicts a scene of leafless trees, blue snow piled high, and soft sounds. When night falls and the temperatures drop even lower, the main character in the story sleeps in a snow cave in hopes of maintaining some warmth and this provides the reader a sense of desperation as she states, "When I did doze off, which was actually more like blacking out than dozing off, I'd come back to my senses wondering if I had

frozen to death, but the alternating pain and numbness that started in my extremities and worked its way into my bones convinced me I must still be alive” (242). An overwhelming sense of struggle is felt in this account of survival. The story’s imagery helps me to understand the character and gain a perspective of the situation in which she placed herself.

Conflict is a complex criterion and must be narrowed down to be properly evaluated. There are different types of conflict (man versus man, man versus self, man versus nature, and man versus supernatural) which characters in a story may experience. By definition, conflict is “The tension in a situation between characters, or the actual opposition of characters” (Cuddon 175). I prefer stories to contain multiple types of conflict. When a story contains more than one form of conflict, a reader’s attention is not focused on a single event. Instead, attention can be drawn into the story by opening multiple sources of tension. This allows for the story to continue even after one conflict is resolved.

In the story “On the Rainy River,” the main character is involved in only one type of conflict— man versus self. He is struggling with the decision to honor his draft notice and to serve in the Vietnam War, or to follow his own anti-war beliefs and escape to Canada. He states, “I couldn’t make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me” (94). Struggles between what is right and wrong continue throughout the story. When he is brought within view of Canada, the images and conflict become more vivid because the character is at a point in his life where a decision *must* be made. He describes the final decision process as, “All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment” (101). At one point, he specifically states, “Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn’t make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with

morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was. And right then I submitted" (101). While the conflict in this short story is intense and very real, it does not fit my criterion of having multiple types of conflict. As previously stated, this story only contains man versus self conflict.

Conflict in "A Blizzard under Blue Sky" comes from more than one source. The story opens addressing internal conflict, or man versus self conflict. The main character is seated in her physician's office when she is told she is clinically depressed (Houston 239). She confirms the doctor's diagnosis when she explains "the snow is fresh and the sun is shining and everybody is happy, except me" (239). In an effort to cure her depression, she decides to partake in a winter camping trip. The trip brings about a second type of conflict: man versus nature. With temperatures lower than average, the main character states, "It was thirty-two below zero in town on the night I spent in my show cave" (239). The excursion takes a turn when the main character finds herself attempting to survive the elements. Focus shifts from the character's depression to her survival. This story met my preferences of conflict because it contained more than one type of conflict. Instead of being so focused on her depression, I was drawn to her survival as well, with her depression issue still in the back of my mind.

Like all good things in life, short stories must come to an end. In literary terms, this is known as the final resolution. The resolution is "untying (L.); denouement (F.)" (Elkhadem 86). I like short stories in which all of the questions presented by the author are answered in the conclusion of the story. I do not like stories containing "cliff hangers" where the reader is left wondering what is going to happen. Being a curious person by nature, if I am left "hanging" with unanswered questions, I tend to become frustrated if answers can neither be researched or readily provided in the story.

In the short story “On the Rainy River,” the reader wonders what the main character’s final decision regarding his draft notice will amount to. Will he choose war? Will he choose to run to Canada? How will he feel about his decision? The story does not conclude before all of these questions have been answered. The main character makes his decision obvious by stating, “I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward” (O’Brien 102). This short story meets my preference because it answered all of my questions and did not leave me wondering what would happen to the character. It even ventured as far as to let the reader know he made it home safely and he was not happy with his decision to fight in the war.

The story “A Blizzard under Blue Sky” encourages the reader to question the main character’s mental wellbeing as well as her physical. The reader asks: will she be happy again? Will she survive the freezing weather? Will she turn back and abort the camping trip in the middle of the night? Each of these questions are answered in turn. The reader not only knows the main character stayed the entire duration of the abnormally cold night, but also knows she survived when she describes daybreak. Providing an end to the curiosity, Houston writes, “The sky began to get gray, and then it began to get pink, and before too long the sun was on my bivvy sack” (242). In response to the main character’s depression, she says, “I won’t try to convince you that my life was like the movies where depression goes away in one weekend, and all life’s problems vanish with a moment’s clear sight. The simple truth of the matter is this: On Sunday I had a glimpse outside of the house of mirrors” (242). This statement clarifies while her depression was not over, in time it would be overcome.

Deciding which short story comes out on top is a difficult task. The imagery in “On the Rainy River” was very vivid and detailed to the point it could almost be classified as gory, and the imagery in “A Blizzard under Blue Sky” was described to the extent the reader could feel the cold seeping into his or her skin. The types of conflict differ within each story. In “On the Rainy River” there was only man versus self conflict. However, “A Blizzard under Blue Sky” contained a similar conflict as the character fights depression, and also man versus nature in her winter camping trip. Both stories ended with a resolution answering all questions presented. In “On the Rainy River” the character went to the Vietnam War and came home alive. Similarly, “A Blizzard under Blue Sky” ended with the main character surviving a harsh winter night and finding a way out of her depression. In terms of which was better, O’Brien’s “On the Rainy River” offers a more precise ending than “A Blizzard under Blue Sky,” and while O’Brien’s short story did not meet all of my preferences, it surpassed my expectations, thereby making it the better short story of the two.

Making a final decision is a difficult task when applied to both literature and life. Taking the decision-making process one step at a time and evaluating the options results in a better informed decision. Using individual criteria as a means of breaking down the process makes the process easier. With a little practice, the process becomes a habit and all future decisions become well thought out.

Works Cited

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Mr. Genre's Comments: *Being one of the more difficult essays to write in my class, I often find a lack of detailed analysis and support in most of my student's efforts. Not so in Tiffany's. Here is a detailed evaluation with support which defines this type of essay.*