

E. B. WHITE

Once More to the Lake (pp. 444–50)

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

White's classic reflective essay takes its place comfortably in any English course. Students enjoy it, saying they can "relate to it"—that goes for urban as well as rural students. They connect not necessarily to the pastoral nature of the piece, but to the family relationships it explores. It helps that many of them were raised on *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. Students will also respect the piece for its eloquent reflection of *The Elements of Style*. If White is a coach telling kids what to do in this manual, "Once More to the Lake" shows that he plays the game of language beautifully. Its tender descriptions, its use of nostalgia, and its natural epiphany are all models for student writing.

After students read the piece overnight, class discussion should focus on White's style. One method for probing the richness of his description is to reduce his contents to simplified sentences. For example, reduce paragraph 11 to "Things at camp were nice. The sounds and smells were pleasing, as was the store." Then, read White and appreciate all the nuances he offers through his seemingly simple delivery. Try this with other White essays they might have read, like "Afternoon of an American Boyhood," and ask them to "color it White." They will welcome the task of creating and even sharing these vivid descriptions. Inevitably, there will be some students who feel their writing can match White's—and this may not be a bad thing.

Close analysis of this passage will also call attention to White's generous use of the word "and"—how it accumulates rather than subordinates, how it piles experience and impression one upon the other throughout. (For an intriguing consideration of the nature of our most common copulative, the teacher might look into "And: A Meditation on the Most Familiar Connective," an essay by William Gass in *Harper's* (February 1984), or into his essay collection *Habitations of the Word*. Some students will suggest that White's regression to his childhood lends a childlike enthusiasm to his narrative style. When they are ready to discuss the speaker's epiphany at the end, many will find it startling; some will register aversion. "I love the piece, but I don't like the ending. I don't get it," some might remark. "Did he die?")

QUESTIONS ON RHETORIC AND STYLE

1. Characterize White's attitude in the opening paragraphs.
2. Note White's use of such original and creative expressions as "had never had any fresh water up his nose." Find and cite a few others.
3. Note White's selection of details in paragraphs 1–6. Indicate a specific example and explain its effect.
4. Indicate three or four examples of figurative language and discuss their purpose.
5. Identify at least one appeal to each of the five senses and explain the effect of each.
6. Discuss the rhetorical purpose served by paragraph 10.
7. Discuss the effect of the specificity of detail in paragraph 11.
8. The concluding sentence of the penultimate paragraph begins with "And." What is the effect of beginning that way?
9. Discuss the nature of the final image of the essay. What rhetorical purpose does it serve?
10. Read the essay a second time and count the "and"s in it. Discuss the effect of their use.

SIMULATED AP ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Rhetorical Analysis.** Read carefully paragraphs 1–6 of “Once More to the Lake.” Write an essay in which you explain how White uses resources of language to develop the idea that “there had been no years.”
- Rhetorical Analysis.** Read carefully paragraphs 11–13 from “Once More to the Lake.” Then write an essay in which you explain how White uses features of style and rhetoric to convey his attitude toward the week spent at camp.
- Argument.** Ernest Hemingway has said that Mark Twain “ruined” *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with its ending. Similarly, some readers feel at the end of “Once More to the Lake” that White has “ruined” his beautiful essay with its concluding paragraph. Using specific evidence from the text of the piece, write an essay in which you argue for or against the suitability of White’s conclusion.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

These multiple-choice questions refer to paragraphs 1–6.

- A prominent characteristic of the passage as a whole is its
 - development of plot
 - accumulation of experience
 - subordination of incident
 - coordination of position
 - analysis of idea
- Paragraph 2 contains each of the following EXCEPT
 - metaphor
 - parallelism
 - personification
 - description
 - simile
- Paragraph 2 includes an appeal to each of the senses EXCEPT
 - sight
 - taste
 - smell
 - touch
 - hearing
- Which of the following contributes most to the concluding sentence of paragraph 6: “There had been no years”?
 - “the vacation” (paragraph 1)
 - “the gunwale” (paragraph 2)
 - “the cottages” (paragraph 3)
 - “the tar” (paragraph 4)
 - “the dragonfly” (paragraph 5)
- In paragraph 6, the phrase “doubling the attendance”
 - adds to the wildlife’s quantification
 - suggests the camp’s overcrowding
 - expands the visual imagery
 - describes the speaker’s attention
 - indicates the minnows’ progeny
- In paragraph 6, the speaker says, “When we got back for a swim before lunch, the lake was exactly where we had left it, the same number of inches from the dock, and there was only the merest suggestion of a breeze.” Which of the following best describes his tone?
 - startled recognition
 - anxious anticipation
 - measured confirmation
 - ironic surprise
 - rapt exhilaration

SUGGESTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

- Write an essay in which you discuss the effect of White’s development according to parataxis, i.e., his copious use of “and” as a rhetorical device. Refer to several examples from the text to support your essay.
- Construct a thesis about the nature of the epiphany. Use the text of White’s essay and that of two others listed under Connections to support your thesis.

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3. In "The Inheritance of Tools" and "Once More to the Lake" the speakers discuss their relationships with their children. Compare the ways that Sanders and White explore the identification between parent and child. In your essay you may include reference to your own experience.
4. Recall a special place that you regard as fondly as White does the lake in Maine. Write an essay in imitation of E. B. White describing that place and delivering a personal insight.

CONNECTIONS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE 50 ESSAYS

INSIDE

In *50 Essays*, students will find other pieces that present moments of enlightenment that might be called epiphanies.

- "The Death of the Moth" by Virginia Woolf
- "Salvation" by Langston Hughes
- "No Name Woman" by Maxine Hong Kingston
- "Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell
- "The Inheritance of Tools" by Scott Russell Sanders

For a cluster on parent and child relationships, students might compare White's essay with

- "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" by Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- "No Name Woman" by Maxine Hong Kingston
- "Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin
- "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood" by Richard Rodriguez
- "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" by Alice Walker

For a discussion about the importance of place, students might compare White's essay with

- "Dwellings" by Linda Hogan
- "The Way to Rainy Mountain" by N. Scott Momaday

OUTSIDE

- For a unit on the nature of epiphany, students might read "Araby" by James Joyce, "On Seeing England for the First Time" by Jamaica Kincaid, "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver, and "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien, along with those suggested in *50 Essays*.

DAVID SEDARIS

Me Talk Pretty One Day (pp. 340–45)

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

As we mentioned in the introduction to the piece by Dave Barry, students sometimes complain about the serious or “depressing” literature that they’re required to read. Here David Sedaris provides another inventive example of levity. Although this essay is a bit longer, it might also be best assigned as part of a small collection of humorous pieces that would include Barry’s “Lost in the Kitchen” and some selections from *The Onion*, or some from *The New Yorker*, such as Anthony Lane’s review of the *Spice Girls* movie or “Coyote v. Acme” by Ian Frazier.

We recommend that students read these texts at home, noting such stylistic features as tone, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, understatement, and stereotypes—features that contribute to humor. Students should come to class with an example of each from each piece. They might also be asked to explain in a paragraph which of the selections achieves the greatest comic effect, and why.

Another strategy would be to provide serious definitions of comedy and the nature of laughter from George Meredith and Henri Bergson, for example, and have the students evaluate Sedaris’s essay according to those definitions or criteria. Finally, a perfect culminating activity would be to take Sedaris as a model and compose a humorous response to a trying situation.

QUESTIONS ON RHETORIC AND STYLE

1. How does Sedaris’s selection of detail in the first paragraph establish a humorous tone?
2. Find at least one example of hyperbole in the essay. What is the effect created through exaggeration?
3. Identify examples of Sedaris’s ethnic references. What is their effect?
4. Identify an instance each of irony and understatement. How do they help to create humor?
5. Explain the effect of the sarcastic remarks of the French teacher.

SIMULATED AP ESSAY QUESTION

1. **Rhetorical Analysis.** Read “Me Talk Pretty One Day” and then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the author uses rhetorical devices to achieve a comic effect.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

These multiple-choice questions refer to the entire essay.

1. Each of the following statements contributes to the humor of the essay EXCEPT
 - a. “If you have not *miemslxp* or *lgpdmurct* by this time, then you should not be in this room.” (paragraph 4)
 - b. “My school is an easy ten-minute walk from my apartment, and on the first day of class I arrived early, watching as the returning students greeted one another in the school lobby.” (paragraph 2)
 - c. “It was startling because (a) I hadn’t been asked that question in a while and (b) I realized, while laughing, that I myself did *not* know the alphabet.” (paragraph 5)
 - d. “. . . I love leafing through medical textbooks devoted to severe dermatological conditions . . .” (paragraph 14)
 - e. “That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty.” (paragraph 25)

Sedaris/Me Talk Pretty One Day

2. Each of the following quotations illustrates the sarcasm of the teacher EXCEPT
 - a. "Oh yeah? And do you love your little war?" (paragraph 12)
 - b. "How very interesting. I thought that everyone loved the mosquito . . ." (paragraph 8)
 - c. "Even a *fiuscrzsa ticiwelmun* knows that a typewriter is feminine." (paragraph 16)
 - d. "Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section." (paragraph 27)
 - e. "You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain . . ." (paragraph 29)
3. Which of the following is an esoteric cultural reference?
 - a. Pa Kettle
 - b. Polish Annas
 - c. Hyeyoon Cho
 - d. Good Sir Dishrag
 - e. Kang and Vlatyna
4. Which of the following sentences is ironic?
 - a. "The teacher marched in, deeply tanned from a recent vacation, and proceeded to rattle off a series of administrative announcements." (paragraph 3)
 - b. "The teacher continued her diatribe and I settled back, bathing in the subtle beauty of each new curse and insult." (paragraph 28)
 - c. "While the optimist struggled to defend herself, I scrambled to think of an answer to what had obviously become a trick question." (paragraph 13)
 - d. "My fear and discomfort crept beyond the borders of the classroom and accompanied me out onto the wide boulevards." (paragraph 22)
 - e. "Fall arrived and it rained every day, meaning we would now be scolded for the water dripping from our coats and umbrellas." (paragraph 27)
5. In the essay Sedaris uses each of the following EXCEPT
 - a. imperative sentence
 - b. declarative sentence
 - c. cumulative sentence
 - d. sentence fragment
 - e. interrogative sentence

SUGGESTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, philosopher Henri Bergson writes the following:

Several have defined man as "an animal which laughs." They might equally as well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, or the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.

Write an essay in which you argue whether "Me Talk Pretty One Day" more effectively presents man as a creature "which laughs" or "which is laughed at."
2. Write an essay in which you argue the case for "Me Talk Pretty One Day" or "Lost in the Kitchen" as the more successful example of a humorous essay. Refer to the texts of both essays to support your essay.
3. Write an essay comparing the ways "Me Talk Pretty One Day" and "There Is No Unmarked Woman" use humor to serve different purposes.
4. Write an essay in which you compare Sedaris's rhetorical strategies in "Me Talk Pretty One Day" with those in one of the pieces in the Outside Connections listed below.
5. Among those listed in Connections, below, argue the case for the most successful example of comic writing.

CONNECTIONS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE 50 ESSAYS

INSIDE

- "Lost in the Kitchen" by Dave Barry
- "There Is No Unmarked Woman" by Deborah Tannen