**Carpe Diem - The Theme of two popular stories** by S. C. Vital Speed



*Secondary sources removed*

Amid the beautiful but complex path toward self-realization and acceptance that we call life, there comes a certain time in which people find themselves accosted by an internal conflict, whether it may be an external plight or simply mid-life crisis. As people age, they start dwelling on their past and become uneasy with themselves with the realization that their familiar and comfortable past is not their present. Some cope with this by facing reality and coming to terms with the present and accepting it, while others cling to the past and let it consume their lives until their cycle is over. This is the theme that unifies the two short stories of “On going home” by Joan Didion, and “Once more to the lake” by E.B. White.

 “On Going Home” expresses strong value towards her past childhood family life and her presently new family life, and tries to unite the two. She begins the story by saying what "home" means to her, and states that her home is not the “house in Los Angeles where my husband and I and the baby live, but the place where my family is, in Central Valley of California” (1419). In opening the story this way, Joan is hinting to the reader that she is uneasy with the difference between them both. She continues on to describe her husband and how he is troubled to be with her family in her “home” because she turns into a different person around her family. It becomes obvious her husband was raised differently and doesn’t like it when his wife falls into the ways of her family, “which are difficult, deliberately inarticulate” (1419).

Joan is struggling with the deterioration of the connection between her roots at “home” and her present life in Los Angeles. For example, her great-aunts don’t remember her, “a few of them think now that I am my cousin, or their daughter who died young” (1420). She doesn’t want to give up either one, and in the struggle to have both gets “trapped in this particular irrelevancy” (1420). To live her old life at “home” would mean that she would have to leave her husband and her baby and return to the Central Valley of California. But, to live her new life would mean she would have to stop dwelling on her former life and accept that Los Angeles is now her “home”. In other words, Joan realizes that it is not possible to merge a childhood home with the present and the only way she can come to terms with the present and thus move on to the future is if she seizes the day, accepts the life she chose to have with her husband, and stops clinging on to the past. These last few words in “On going home” show just that idea of her accepting to live her new life in the present: “I would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now, and I can promise nothing like that” (1421).

 “Once More to the Lake” by E.B. White, is a meaningful story in which has a similar theme to “On Going Home” of accepting the present, and trying to stop living the past. White’s past life as a child is in a struggle with his present life as a father. He starts by illustrating a lake in Maine which was his childhood summer vacations spot that his family would go to every summer. He expresses the joy he felt that the lake and now that he is older, he wishes to share with his son that experience and takes him to the lake on a summer vacation. At the lake things were pretty much how he remembered and seeing his son there and hearing him sneak out in the crack of the dawn, he felt a new sensation which he hadn’t felt before; he felt himself as his son and realized that if his son is him, then he must be his father. “… lying in bed the first morning, smelling the bedroom, and hearing the boy sneak quietly out and go off… I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father” (1422- 1423). White was basically reliving his first trip to the lake through his son, but he was also experiencing it for the first time as a father, he “seemed to be living a dual existence” which he described as: “It gave a creepy sensation” (1422- 1423).

As White spent more time at the lake, he kept sensing more uncanny feelings. When he was fishing with his son, he came to the realization “that everything was as it always had been that the years were a mirage and that there had been no years” (1423). That realization further proves the idea that he is experiencing a dual existence, through reminiscence of his first trip with his father. He was so caught up thinking about his past trip, and now in his fantasy there is no past to cling on to, no present, no years, he could keep living dual existences with his present fatherly self, and also with the “placidity” he had as a child (1422). This is what his father sought for when he brought him to the lake. Now he is his father, and also brings his son to the serene lake in search of placidity.

However, the sense of frozen time was only held in place by the timeless natural forces of the lake which stayed the same. When White saw his son go swimming, he watched and suddenly felt the effect of time, “with no thought of going in, I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare…he buckled the swollen belt, suddenly my groin felt the chill of death”(1426). When he saw his son go swimming, it finally hit him that despite the lake’s appearance stayed the same, he changed and got older and therefore his son too will get old and will bring his son to the lake as well, and it is merely a traditional vacation within a universal cycle that goes from birth to death, and he is also part of it like his father and his son are as well; he accepted his past is in the past and he needs to live the present. That realization threw him off his fantasy and back into reality that gave him the “chill of death” since he realized that he is not immortal.

This story serves as an example to show that we must look ahead towards the future, seize the day and live each day as much as we can, but of course that can only be done if we come to terms with the present and stop dwelling and hanging on to our comfortable and familiar past lives.

This theme, as stated in the beginning, is what unifies both of these stories. They both lived in the present, and missed certain aspects of their past which they attempted to live with them in the present, but they realized they couldn’t because their life in the present is different, the world changed and they must seize the moment, carry on towards the future, and build a new past.

*Carpe Diem – Latin for “Seize the day”*

*Vixi Vestri Postremo Nunc – Latin for “Live your future now”*