

“David” - analysis

When Earle Birney in his poem "David" combines a Canadian setting, the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, with a universal statement about loyalty and friendship which has relevance in the world today, he appears to be on the point of developing a western Canadian mythology. Speaking about his narrative poem, "David", in *The Creative Writer*, a CBC Publication, he indicates his literary purpose:

"I did think of this as a kind of poem, from the start, but as a story, too, a narrative: If I'd been just a little more interested in trying to make the two characters in it more complex and realistic, I'd have tried it as a short story. *But I wanted to present, as intensely as I could, the symbolic aspect of my two characters in relation to certain values of life and death, and to the conflict between man and nature, and between loyalty and guilt in man.*"

Consider the three themes suggested by Birney in the opening quotation: while the poem is concerned with a specific situation that occurred during a mountain climbing expedition, it also widens to take in certain moral considerations that motivate most people during certain critical periods in their lives. The first two themes related to "David"—the values of life and death and the conflict between man and nature—have universal application. Likewise, the third theme, the conflict between loyalty and guilt in man, which is really Bob's story, is also within the experience of most people. While Bob's feelings and behaviour show a more traditional way of looking at life with regard to each of the three themes, David's words and actions reveal a different and perhaps more individualistic attitude.

In considering the first theme, the values of life and death, you may want to think about the justification of the practice of euthanasia or mercy killing as a means to end suffering. However, was Bob's fatal push of David, in fact, an example of mercy killing? Would not a refusal by Bob to push David over the cliff have saved his friend's life? If so, would not David still be able to lead a useful and meaningful life, despite being crippled?

David accepted death when the right time came. When he could no longer have freedom or independence, it was part of his code to seek death. David could not see himself, a future cripple, as being "useful." In addition, he could not face life without having the independence to which he had been accustomed. David's death would mean an easier life for his family and friends. The poem implies that death is a necessary process for the continuance of life in the cycle of nature. Bob, in contrast to David, took the more traditional view toward life and death. At first he protested against David's request that he push him over. Later he experienced horror and revulsion after finally carrying out the act of killing.

The second theme, the conflict between man and nature, show that from a physical point of view, in any event, nature wins sooner or later against man's struggle for survival.

Nature has in at least one important way won the conflict against man in "David." Although the boys appear to be overcoming the resistance of nature when they scale the Finger on Sawback, they are defeated by nature when David slips and falls. At this point David realizes that it is time for him to give up the struggle, since he does not want to live a cripple, an interesting variation of nature's law that only the fittest shall survive. The force of nature appears to be indifferent, uncompromising, and unwilling to make distinctions or exceptions.

While in one way David lost the battle to nature, in another Birney suggests that he personally triumphs, since the reader cannot help admiring David's courage in adhering to his principles. You may feel that Bob, too, has won a personal victory in being brave enough to kill the friend he loved.

The third theme, the conflict between loyalty and guilt in man, presents Bob's loyalty to his friend in conflict with his moral revulsion against murder. Loyalty proves to be a higher moral criterion than life. However, the ugliness of the description during Bob's run down the mountain to the camp indicates that Bob must later pay the price of guilt. Further evidence of this occurs when Bob lies to the people at the camp that David "fell straight to the ice where they found him." Presumably, he will have to keep up the lie during his entire lifetime. However, Bob gains from the experience a first-hand knowledge of death and a lasting maturity, suggested by the final line of the poem, "the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains."

Section One of the poem acts as an introduction which tells the reader briefly how the boys came to be mountain-climbing so frequently: "David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey." From the start, descriptive language creates a dominant atmosphere of freedom associated with mountain climbing, opposed to the confinement or even imprisonment of camp society. While the phrases, "sunalive weekends" and "mountains for David were made to see over", indicate their sense of freedom on the mountains, "the ruck of the camp" and "the snoring under the fetid/Tents" reveal the ugliness and misery of being confined. The contrast between freedom and imprisonment is continued throughout the poem.

The rising action of the plot begins with the reference in the second section to the first mountain that the boys try to scale, Mount Gleam. In this group of stanzas the exhilarating feeling of freedom derived from mountain climbing is again suggested by the vivid lines, "we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned/On a poplar prong in the hurrying slant of the sunset", which appeal richly to the senses of touch, smell, and sight. The lines, "And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden/Cliff," which appeal to touch, hearing, and motion, on the other hand, vaguely foreshadow danger. From this point on,

the mountains are personified, with phrases such as "the swell of its sprawling shoulders" and "The peak was upthrust/Like a fist", almost as if they were embodying the beauty and danger of nature. The indifference of nature to man, which proves to be a reality of the poem, is also suggested in Section Two by the poet's use of coldly objective words such as "skree", broken rock; "shale", a type of igneous rock; "larches", coniferous trees; "gentian", a blue and yellow flowering plant; and "saxifrage", a rock plant. The different levels of language, ranging from colloquial to formal and scientific, also help to give the poem an appealing richness of texture.

Section Three is important because at this time the boys discover "unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback" which David names "the Finger." The name, which is in keeping with the poet's personification of the mountains, is appropriate because it has the effect of beckoning to the boys. Interest in the plot also increases when the boys find the bones of a mountain goat surrounded by hawk's feathers. The line, "And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip", foreshadows David's fall. Later it is evident that the goat is a symbol for David—and for all of mankind, for that matter—while the hawk's silken feathers, like the mountains, symbolize the destructive power of nature. In this section the poet also gives character to David and Bob. While Bob is a student of life, David acts as his tutor; as well as teaching Bob about mountain climbing, David teaches him "how time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments/Remembered from poets." In Section Four David teaches Bob "to read the scroll of coral in limestone." Because Bob is the first-person narrator of the story, the reader identifies with him throughout the poem, and thus learns from David, as Bob does, about the experience of life and death.

To Bob it seems that David's knowledge about life is exceeded only by his skill as a mountain-climber. In Section Five, after scaling Inglismaldie, the boys climb Sundance. David is forced to hang by his "quivering pick" and then to kick "to the crest", where, after ascending himself, he draws Bob up after him. His mountain-climbing ability identifies him directly with the sure-footed mountain goat in Section Three which, ironically, fell to its death. In this section, David kills a robin with a broken wing (later symbolically linked with him), saying, "Could you teach it to fly?" In this symbolic episode, David's love of freedom and physical health is shown to exceed his fear of death.

Although Section Five in a way prepares the reader for David's death, Section Six, which immediately precedes David's accident, lulls the reader into a trap. Rather than appearing cold and cruel as it does later to Bob, nature is depicted as bountiful and generous on the mountain called The Fortress. A sense of fulfilment in the lives of the two boys is suggested by the references to their good eating and to the abundance of wildlife about them. While David and Bob catch trout, frying them "over a balsam fire", and eat "sunhot raspberries", the woods are filled with "the vaulting of muledeer" and other animals

including "a marten moving like quicksilver." It is ironical that during this time of fulfilment, marked by their achievement of the summit of Sawback, nature should intervene and defeat the boys. At the beginning of the seventh section, the power of nature over man is suggested by the fact that the boys were unable to get to sleep the night before. It is as if "the moon- light/Etching the Finger" were casting a powerful spell over them.

Prior to David's fall at the end of Section Seven, the narrative is structured so that tension slowly builds with the following lines:

But always we talked of the Finger on Saw back, unknown. . . .
At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed.
Then David. . . discovered the chimney.

You will observe that the cairn built by the boys on the "rotting tip" of the Finger in tribute to their achievement ironically becomes a symbolic memorial for David's death later in the poem. While it represents victory at this point in the poem, the cairn later stands for their defeat. Following a steady build-up of the plot, the crisis occurs when, turning to look at Mount Assiniboine from the Finger, Bob slips and David reaches out to steady him. David's action crumbles his own foothold, and he falls. Like Bob, the reader is left to wonder whether David will survive.

The outcome of the fall is revealed in Section Eight. Although he has not been killed, David is seriously injured. The poet's description of him appropriately brings together several of the symbols mentioned earlier in the poem. "His legs/Slayed beneath him" identify him with the "splayed white ribs/Of a mountain goat" described in Section Three, while the hawk, "buoying/ Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice" is associated with the hawk feathers found earlier near the bones of the goat. Similarly, David's cry, "Perhaps. . . For what? A wheelchair,/Bob?" recalls to the reader his earlier words about the injured Robin: "Could you teach it to fly?" A continuation here of the vivid description in Section Seven effectively reinforces the idea that man is weak and insignificant in relation to nature's great but indifferent power. For instance, Bob feels beneath David "a cruel fang/Of the ledge thrust in his back", again a personification of nature's cruel power. Later, the poet describes David lying "still as a broken doll", while the sun shines brightly and almost mockingly, leaning round and flooding the ledge.

The eighth section is the only part of the poem where dialogue is used extensively to dramatize the story by making the events seem more realistic and consequently more powerful. As well as emphasizing the severity of David's pain, the dialogue between the two boys also reveals his character. His magnanimity is shown in his exclamation, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself./I didn't test my foothold." His courage and strength of

will are expressed in his plea, "'Bob, I want to go over!'" In addition, his strong loyalty is indicated in his final statement, "'I'd do it for you, Bob.'" On the other hand, Bob's inner conflict between loyalty to his friend and moral abhorrence of killing is revealed in his offer to fetch help, "'I'll be back here by midnight with ropes. . .'" His realization that David had tested his holds and that it was himself who had not, however, ultimately causes him to grant David his wish.

At this point in the poem, consider reasons why the poet does not mention Bob's fatal push which constitutes the unwritten climax of the poem. You may suggest that if Bob's action had been described, the effect might have been one of melodrama rather than the tragedy intended. Perhaps you think that a description of the killing would indicate that Bob had indeed committed murder and not "mercy killing" as Birney intended. The effect of the moral statement implied in the poem, that sometimes the criterion of friendship is greater than life itself, would in such a case have been reversed.

Section Nine concludes the poem swiftly once Bob gets down from the mountain and reaches camp. During his run down the mountainside, however, vivid description by the poet conveys the boy's guilt and moral revulsion. It is as if shame and terror have heightened Bob's sensual perceptions. Words such as "twist", "pounding", "reeling", "running", "leaping", "staggered", and "hurled" reveal that his sense of motion is intensified. In addition, sights, sounds, and smells have become sickeningly ugly, as in "the reek/Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene", "my feet squelched a slug", and "in the woods behind some animal yelped." Personification is still used effectively to refer to the mountain accusing him in the lines, "pursued/By the Finger's lengthening shadow," and "the fanged/And blinding seracs"; while David's dead body, which becomes associated with Bob's own feelings of guilt, is now identified as "It", as if it were some unnamed beast or some unmentionable taboo. While the negative effects of the experience on Bob are shown in detail in the concluding section of the poem, only the last line reveals that he did gain knowledge and maturity during "That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains." This line makes a satisfying conclusion from the standpoint of plot structure as well as thematic development.

From a study of the narrative techniques and the uses of language, you should appreciate that a degree of intensity has been achieved which likely could not have been reached in a short story.

Analysis taken from GUIDEBOOK for Theme and Image Book 1, Carol Gillanders