Watershed

Matthew Doyle
Caverna High School, matt.ryan.doyle@gmail.com

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As the title announces, “Watershed (1932)” by Robert Penn Warren is a pun in itself. The title is named “Watershed.” Watershed has two main definitions -- an area of land that separates water streams, or a huge turning point in a serious event. Given the year of this poem, one could imply the watershed is the Great Depression, since it too was in that era. The poem uses imagery to express the actual meaning in the words. Warren wrote this poem with intentions to wake up the world during this time, and to set their minds to greater places.

“From this place all things flow” implies the author is looking at the era at a different state of mind than the rest of the world. The author explains humanity’s biggest worry is survival when he says “Eastward, westward without memento.” He further elaborates with a biblical allusion, “Have felt the shudder and sweat of stone.” The bible uses sweating of stones as an indication that humanity has given up on savoring life and valuing such a precious gift. “His gold eyes scan the crumpled shade…” implies he is watching the world lose faith in every aspect but survival instinct. He was one of the few who still valued “god” and morals at this time.

As I walk through the halls of my school, I find my perspective coincides with Warren’s. Simple minds pass before my eyes, and I grieve at the lack of realization that I sense. School should not be considered a prison, it should be considered as a place to excel with one’s mind and enhance one’s intellectual skills with education. I watch as careless decisions are tossed around without reason, and it only reminds me more of why my mind works the way it does; We are gathered here with one another, and are rich in more ways than capital or money. We are rich with connections and relations to one another.

The author states “…the morning mist is curled like smoke…,” which implies he watched the world he loved turn into a harsh wasteland. “This place. Not love, happiness past, constrains, but certitude. Enough, and it remains.” Each person had their goal set on getting “enough” to survive. One can draw from this that Warren valued much more than survival
instincts in his priorities. He implies he views the world uniquely as compared to the ideas of others.

Warren states “The sunset hawk now rides the tall light up the climbing deep of air.” One could imply the sunset hawk is his state of mind. As the sunset hawk actually does, he too is metaphorically looking down at the world. From his perspective, he can “see” everything, much like the sunset hawk. In this case, he is referring to the world and humanity’s perspective on ways of life in the Great Depression.

From his “high place,” Warren is trying to share his desire for appreciation beyond the basic needs of human life. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs chart can be applied, here. Humanity, generally, prioritizes physiological needs, rather than safety and love, not to mention self esteem. Physiological needs include: food, water, shelter, sleep, and breathing. The author feels as if few focus beyond this point. There is simply no point in savoring survival if the life that’s being fought for is not appreciated.

The author takes one whole line to weave “The mist is furled” into the poem. Mist, referring to the previous line, “the morning mist is curled like smoke,” is now demented, or “furled.” Warren must have meant this with deep emotion, as if the rest of the world’s perspective mattered to him; he watched as their appreciation for life was lost. From this “high place,” he watches the world crumble. As he is still valuing relationships, connections, security, and reliability through the ability to clear his mind and to rejuvenate his appreciation for the gift of life, and the true ability to connect with others and their experiences with this great gift. He watches his priorities become uncommon thoughts in society.

Without imagery and metaphors, this poem cannot be understood. If the sentences are broken down, great details can be drawn from his vocabulary; for example, earlier in the essay, the verb “furled” is taken into great consideration. The Great Depression impacted the views of
everyone in a wide area of coverage. The majority became so focused with physiological needs like survival instinct and resources required to live, that they became blinded from seeing the beauty of the gift of life. They no longer see what life has to offer for them, but what they have to offer life in order to survive. Warren, however, stuck true to his appreciation for connections, relationships, and coherence to other individuals. Through it all, he watched the world differ from his unique ideas, and he continued to be in this state of mind, a place away from everyone, so that his mind could be clear, and at ease.