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Cameron Fontes

Western Kentucky University, cameron.fontes603@topper.wku.edu

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Recommended Citation

Fontes, Cameron, "Motions Like Sleep in Robert Penn Warren's "Lullaby"" (2020). *Robert Penn Warren Essay Contest*. Paper 7.

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Cameron Fontes

First Place Winner, Robert Penn Warren Essay Contest

Motions Like Sleep in Robert Penn Warren's "Lullaby"

In Robert Penn Warren's poem "Lullaby: A Motion like Sleep," a father softly pleads with his son to give into the impulse of sleep, evoking vivid imagery through the use of figurative language and distinct formal choices. Specifically, Warren utilizes the metaphors of flowing water and blood, along with a distinctive rhyme scheme, to reflect the fluid nature of sleep in his poem.

Warren first relates sleep to moving water in the poem's first stanza when he writes that "Water moves, in a motion like sleep" (4). However, this introduction to one of the poem's primary metaphors does not come until halfway through the first stanza. Warren's decision to withhold mention of this metaphor until immediately after the third line break contrasts the image of water in motion with the immobile natural images in the lines that precede it, including a willow tree in its "dim solitudes" (2) and a stone that reflects "star-glinted upbraiding" (3). These images in the first three lines of the poem are not only situated in contrast to the image of moving water due to their placement within the structure of the text, but also because of their location within the image crafted by Warren of a moving stream that flows between two solemn banks, "Along the dark edge of the woods" (5). The trees, rocks, and stars in Warren's metaphoric vision loom over the running water, unmoving. Warren's description of the willow as having "solicitude" personifies it as caring or even anxious towards the water that flows beneath it, much like the attitude of speaker of the poem towards his son. Warren's description of the stone as "upbraiding" also reflects a possible attitude of a parent entreating their child to sleep,

albeit more sternly. In either case, the figures on the banks of the stream act as foils to the tranquil water between them that progresses towards something inevitable, much like a weary child cannot help but drift off to sleep.

Warren's use of an unstoppable current as a metaphor for the inevitability of sleep is reinforced in the poem's second stanza, in which he describes the flowing water as "wan" (8). This characterization of the water has evolved from the simple, natural motion introduced in the first stanza into a languid, fatigued movement, much like the normal progression of sleep from slight exhaustion to extreme drowsiness, and then finally to deep slumber. Deep slumber in the poem is a destination at which the water will arrive to discover "the dark of its own deepest knowledge," (9) a fitting description of the truths to the brink of which a sleeping child may travel in deepest sleep, truths that are yet too profound and bleak for them to grasp. As the water progresses to its own point of inmost knowing, Warren describes the night around it as heavy with "languor," (11) the state of the trees and rocks on the banks having now devolved into a weariness similar to that of the water, much like the speaker of the poem becomes weary himself as he guides his son into the weariness that comes before sleep.

After the heavy exhaustion of the second stanza, Warren moves from the natural world outside the human body to the organic matter within it, writing of "how deep and dreamless/The covered courses of blood are" (13-14). The flowing motion of blood is similar to that of water in that it is "like sleep," (15), but different in that it reflects no light. It is "gleamless" (15). The poem's sinking into sleep has now reached the point of physical darkness; no longer does starlight illuminate the flowing path of sleep. As for blood in the body, sleep now inhabits "alleys...in the leafage of no star" (16-17). Warren's use of the word "alleys" connotes a foreboding, manmade border on both sides of the bloodstream of sleep, which lies in stark

contrast to the more pastoral trees and stones that lay beside the water earlier in the poem. As the child to whom the speaker is talking and the reader are drawn further into sleep, the metaphor of blood reminds them that like the life that the flow of blood supplies, sleep is only fleeting, and should be embraced before it is too late.

Then, in the poem's fourth stanza, the flowing streams of water and blood meet, with what Warren describes as "a motion with one name" (20). He also notes that their motion will find "end but in its own source,/And a circuit of motion like sleep" (21-22). This description of the cyclical nature of sleep is reflected in the rhyme scheme of the entire poem. Each stanza of six lines follows an ABACBC pattern, the interweaving of pairs of rhyming lines mirroring the interwoven cycles of sleep. Much like water flows from streams to oceans and back again as rain, and like blood rushes from heart to mind and back again, so too does the mind move from one cycle of sleep into the next before waking.

Warren ends with the speaker begging his son to sleep before he must wake and fall victim to "Time's irremediable joy" (29). Indeed, the sum of Warren's use of metaphor and rhyme scheme to imitate the feeling and structure of sleep is that the reader finds that they insist along with the speaker that the child to whom he is speaking go to sleep, if only to avoid the harsh reality that awaits him with age, if only to stave off the cruel work of time.