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An Investigation of Thematic Development in Jehanne Dubrow's "The Blue Dress"

Jehanne Dubrow's poem, "The Blue Dress", depicts the sorrow of recollecting one's past and being confronted with the inevitability of loss that comes with the passage of time. The poet develops this theme through narrative style, figurative devices, and structure.

The narrative indicates the presence of two timelines, initially generating ambiguity around the speaker's identity. While the act of "playing dollies and Let's Pretend" (Dubrow 1) suggests that the narrator is a young girl, the sophisticated prose in which the recount is told assumes the voice of an adult. In following through with the latter, the poem's context is revealed: a grown woman reflects on a childhood memory in which she uncovers hidden articles - notably the titular "blue dress" (12) - that belonged to her mother.

Despite the initial lightheartedness brought upon by the excitement of discovery, the poem progressively adopts an ominous undertone as Dubrow introduces rather violent and disturbing imagery. The dress, for instance, is "pushed to the back" (3) of the drawer, as if someone had forcibly tried to keep it hidden. The next few lines contribute to an increasingly dismal atmosphere by juxtaposing youthful connotations - from the delicacy of "folded silk" (2) to the photographed "young couple" (7) - with implications of death and aging. A simile likens

the blue dress to “skin near drowning” (4), and a subtle metaphor represents the mother’s face as “water just before a stone / drops in” (9-10), encapsulating the ephemeral condition of her juvenility. The poem thus seems to not only lament the mother’s presumed death, but also the departure of youth. Interestingly, while the narrator ruminates on her mother’s transition into old age, readers witness the same transformation in the narrator. The young girl in the beginning is “tired” (1) of childhood games, indicating that she is exhausted - or bored - of the world her puerile imagination conjures; she is growing up.

Through not oblivious to her maturation, the narrator’s internal conflict with the notion that one cannot remain young - just as the old have had “lives before” (11) - resonates through the inconsistencies in the poem’s structural elements. The rigid uniformity of line lengths contrasts sharply with the lack of rhythmic pattern and rhyme. The form also captures time’s multidirectional movement. While the poem’s visible uniformity suggests a linear motion, the heavy enjambment of each line creates a cyclical feel as the words connect from one end to the other, then start back at one end without break. Through this effect, Dubrow may be suggesting that despite time’s relentless headway, the past is bound to resurface and be experienced anew. The last line, a haunting metaphor relating the blue dress to a “body dragged from a lake” (13), cuts off short as the narrator makes a blunt, almost defeated acceptance of her fate: like her mother, she too will one day be reduced to a memory.

“The Blue Dress” effectively combines a plethora of formal elements to communicate the struggle to submit to time’s dictation of life. The interplay between diction, figurative speech, structure generate a nostalgic setting, culminating in a melancholic conclusion that allows readers to share the narrator’s sense of emptiness and anticipation of loss that has yet to come.

Works Cited

Dubrow, Jehanne. "The Blue Dress." *The New York Times Magazine*. 21 May 2015.

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