

Name

Professor

Course

Date

Maxine Kumin's *Woodchucks*

Introduction

Poet and author Maxine Kumin's *Woodchucks* has taken on a life of its own, apart from its value as a poem. It has been analyzed to an extraordinary degree, and meanings within it have been identified and debated to the degree of works by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

The poem itself is short; running only to five stanzas of six lines each, and reads in a straightforward, narrative manner. It relates the narrator's desire to kill the woodchucks spoiling his or her land, and quickly indicates a pleasure taken in the killing. This has been widely interpreted, largely because of Kumin's war references, to represent the innate savagery of man and reflect the horrors of World War II specifically.

However, the poem is neither subtle nor powerful enough to achieve such a goal, if that was the author's intent. It is also too short to convey anything beyond the narrator's albeit conflicted state of mind regarding the woodchucks. A simple, well-constructed verse, *Woodchucks* loses value only if it is taken as being a specific statement about war.

Analysis of the Poem

Arguments made for a potent and intended war metaphor in *Woodchucks* are not lacking in evidence. The poem begins with the word, "gassing", as the narrator's whole tale is one point within the pursuit of getting rid of the woodchucks on the farm. The words, "bomb", "out of range", "pacifist", and "Nazi" shortly come into play as well, and this cascade of images certainly makes a statement in so short a verse. A critic could easily wonder at this kind of language used in a farm setting, and conclude that the intended destruction of the creatures must have a greater meaning.

To add to this view, the language is sparse and clipped. It sounds like a soldier talking; in the fourth stanza is the line, "Ten minutes later I dropped the mother," and this has both the cynical slang of the soldier in it, as well as the military aspect implied by the waiting for ten minutes. Earlier on, there are references to cigarettes and store-bought Scotch, which also serve to suggest a soldier's few pleasures while at war. There is, too, a suggestion that an initial

pity is turned into coldness, which is taken as symbolic of what happens to young boys in wartime.

By the time the poem concludes, the narrator is frustrated by the failure to kill the last woodchuck in this family, and he or she dreams of drawing a rifle on it, even as the wish is expressed that the creatures should have died without resistance or fuss when the gas was first used on them. All of this can be taken as war metaphor, naturally enough, and this is also why those who see *Woodchucks* as an interpretation of wartime horror tend to assume the narrator is a man, when in fact the sex is never revealed. Given the merciless tone of the poem, even the one-word name adds to the view; it may as well be called, *Nazis*, or *Jews*.

All of this reasoning and evidence behind the interpretation, however, is exactly why that interpretation cannot be accurate. To accept that Maxine Kumin deliberately wrote a poem wherein a farmer's extermination of rodents is symbolic of war, and World War II in particular, is to both ignore that ordinary language is composed of larger world experiences not directly had by everyone, and to discredit Kumin as a poet because no good poet would intentionally go for so extreme and obvious an effect.

First and foremost, the farmer's gender should never be supposed as male. It is common knowledge that, in rural areas, women take on the rough chores men traditionally handle, and shooting at some field pests is a perfectly ordinary thing for a farmwoman to do. Assuming that the killing of the woodchucks, along with the increased desire to do it, is clearly a masculine behavior is an assumption as unfounded as the taking of the poem to be a statement on war.

Then, when it comes to all the warlike language used, there is the dilemma of how everyday people pick up on, and then employ, such language. It cannot be ignored that Kumin was a young woman when World War II was fought, even as that fact arises merely from her poetry itself. All of America was deeply invested in what was going on overseas in those years, and the American idiom grew to embrace the slang of soldiers. It makes perfect sense, that a woman farmer of the era would refer to "drawing a bead" on her enemy, the woodchuck; this was a phrase heard in movies and in news reports all the time. Moreover, even the clipped sentences of the poem reflect the language of the day. It was a non-nonsense, snappy form of speaking, in keeping with a watchful, alert nation.

As for the assertions that the narrator's change, from feeling some unease to a cold-blooded killer frame of mind, is evidence of how war infects young minds: to accept that as a motive for *Woodchucks* is to be able to read virtually anything into any poem which relates a single, human experience. A farmer kills pests in *Woodchucks*, but, if that is

translated as a war metaphor, then Frost's *The Road Not Taken* could be seen as a plea for pacifism. All human experience is subject to such views, and it is not correct to assume the poet has a deliberate intent when so many possibilities are at play.

Woodchucks is a plain verse with only a few things to say: that killing becomes easier after it is first done, and that sentimentality does not stand up to the realities of farm life. It also says that such killing changes people in unforeseen and disturbing ways. None of that, however, speaks directly to actual war. Kumin states, more basically, that there is heartlessness in living. A simple, well-constructed poem, *Woodchucks* loses value only if it is taken as being a specific statement about the nature of man and war.

Works Cited

Kumin, M. *Maxine Kumin: Selected Poems, 1960 – 1990*. New York, NY: W.W.Norton & Company Inc., 1998.

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