

Read "Traveling through the Dark" by William Stafford and "Woodchucks" by Maxine Kumin, two poems in which a speaker considers the death of animals. Plan and write a comparison and contrast essay in which you analyze the resources of language Stafford and Kumin use to reveal the relationship between the speakers and the animals.

Eleventh grader Rebecca Shifera has written a comparison and contrast essay about the two poems. Consider the way she organized and wrote the essay. You might discuss with your class the ways in which her approach worked or didn't work.

"Traveling through the Dark" and "Woodchucks"

Rebecca Shifera

The more animals share our physical traits, the more we tend to have pity on them and their fate, particularly if it happens to be a bad one. The smaller they are, the more we see them as freeloading parasites. It is our duty to wipe them off the face of the earth. Our family has a philosophy of loving animals, small or large, "from a distance." That is how we avoid emotional attachment to creatures outside the human race. When you step back, you can state in full confidence that animals are neither good nor bad. We are the ones that portray them as such based on our cultures and life experiences. Because we have dominion over most of the terrestrial territory, we are constantly under the illusion that we are entitled to live without the presence of animals within our domain if we so choose. Woe to them if they happen to be in our civilized paths. We can carefully analyze the two ways in which humans respond to deaths of different species, whether they are responsible, morally or physically, for their extermination or not.

The speaker of William Stafford's poem appears to be more humane than the one from Maxine Kumin's piece. The narrator of "Traveling through the Dark" presents a caring façade. He cites the exact location where he found the deer, "Wilson River road" (l. 2). Considering the fact that finding a deer's carcass was not on his agenda, we are surprised that he looks back on it with such detail. This recollection is entirely in his favor as it demonstrates that the incident was shocking enough for him to remember. The speaker took his time to analyze the state of the poor creature and silently mourn her in the gradation in line 6: "the heap, a doe, a recent killing." As readers, we feel compassion towards this blameless man who pities an animal he has not killed. The next action that we would expect from the speaker is to leave the doe or push her into the river. But the narrator manages to thrill our compassionate side through physical contact with the deer: his fingers "touching her side" (l. 9) and leading him into more "hesitat[ion]" (l. 12). This display of deep strain is in complete opposition to the speaker of "Woodchucks." Indeed, the first word of the poem is "Gassing" (l.1). This strikes us as shocking, as we are not used to such blunt language. The tone is eerie as we learn of the speaker's detailed plan to murder the woodchucks. The speaker turns a rodent extermination into a battle between humans, who are good, and woodchucks, which are evil. The poem's diction suggests the mass murder of an archenemy: "knockout bomb" (l. 2), "murderer" (l. 23), "killer" (l. 24), "gassed" (l. 30). At this point, we can just label the speaker as deranged. The graphic imagery of the poem is more than enough to pass judgment on the speaker, and we start siding with the wronged woodchucks. Furthermore, this bloody enterprise is successful only where women, "I dropped the mother" (l. 19) and children, "the littlest woodchuck" (l. 17) are concerned. All the respect we might have had for the speaker has evaporated to let pitiful disdain settle in our hearts, which have now hardened.

The speakers of the two poems know that ultimately their feelings cannot take precedence over reasoning. The one from "Traveling through the Dark" faces the dilemma of what course to take near the very beginning of the poem. There is a sense of smoothness suggested by the alliteration in "l" in line 3: "usually . . . roll"; events will follow one after the other. The speaker realizes that no matter how much he might pity the doe and her unborn fawn, he must adhere to common sense and go through with his disposal of her body. Similarly, the speaker from Maxine Kumin's poem is facing the destruction of a vegetable garden by rodents. The speaker's justification, that they are stealing "[t]he food from our mouths" (l.13), comes up near the middle of the poem. This justification, before the start of the measured destruction of the creatures, tells us that the speaker must have been struggling with guilt. However heartless we might have believed the speaker to be until this point, he or she is slowly redeeming him- or herself in the readers' eyes. Only the speaker of the William Stafford poem goes through with "push[ing] her over the edge" (l. 18). He has come to a point of no return. The narrator of "Woodchucks," however, has an uncompleted mission. The motivation to kill the "one chuck [that is] left" (l. 25) has not ceased. The speaker bitterly accuses the "[o]ld wily" (l. 25) woodchuck of being too shrewd. We can see that in both cases, the human psyche has the upper hand in all decisions concerning the fate of all creatures surrounding us.

Although we might have started out with a prejudice toward either speaker, one is no guiltier than the other. Neither of them really got to know the animals they were dealing with and chose to act the way almost anybody would if they were faced with the same decision. What we do realize is that nature does not stop from flourishing simply because we might be stymied by it. On the other hand, we do have a significant impact on our environment. I believe we can do what seems fit to us concerning animals so long as we thoroughly consider the consequences of our actions.