

**“The Third Bank of the River”
By João Guimarães Rosa**

Though João Guimarães Rosa’s “The Third Bank of the River” is often taught and anthologized, critics have interpreted it a variety of ways. What follows are some different readings of the story grouped by an interpretation of Rosa’s symbolism in the text.

DIRECTIONS: After reading João Guimarães Rosa’s “The Third Bank of the River,” choose ONE of the pairs of paragraphs to write (grouped by type of figurative language).

metaphor

Some commentators have identified the river itself as life-- not in the sense of an individual life *per se*, but in the sense of *existence*. It is the meaning of the word when one says, for example, “That’s life.” Of course, an individual life contributes to this larger meaning of the word, but a more fruitful comparison is to think of the river as the sum total of *all* individual lives: a life process of which an individual is merely a part.

In this view, the comparison is being made because (at least in the way that it is described in the story), the river shares certain characteristics with life, and the way that the father interacts with the river mirrors the way that individuals interact with the world around them.

Your task is to 1) describe how the comparison of the river to life is being made (a separate paragraph in which identify the characteristics they share that makes the metaphor work), and 2) given this description of life (as developed by Rosa), what does the author seem to be saying about either life or an individual’s place in a larger universe (another paragraph)? There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.

metonymy

The boat that the father uses to navigate the river is almost certainly a metonym, but a metonym for what? A boat obviously connotes some measure of safety (protecting one from drowning), but some critics have also suggested that the boat is a sort of coffin (and the father’s life on the river a sort of living death). There is, of course, no reason why it cannot be both (or something else entirely, given that Rosa incorporates paradoxical elements into the plot.

Since a metonym (unlike a metaphor) is about shared associations (rather than a straightforward comparison), the first order of business would be to track the context and connotations of the boat imagery in the story.



João Guimarães Rosa
1908-1967

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Your task is to 1) describe all the associations and connotations of boat imagery in the story (one paragraph), and 2) use these patterns to generalize about how the boat is used as a symbol in the story (another paragraph). There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.



synecdoche

One of the most powerful tools to understanding the bigger ideas behind the literal meaning of a text is to treat it as synecdoche-- to say that the text is somehow typical of a larger idea, and the one instance is being substituted for a general type of similar experience. This sounds more complicated than it is.

Consider, for example, the boy's relationship to his father. The father is both present and absent, and he remains a large influence on the boy, despite having little or no physical contact with him. The boy also seems to have a deep-seated need to form this attachment, to the point that the relationship exists almost entirely in the boy's imagination.

If this is the particular instance, what does the story say about father/son relationships in general? Or perhaps the story only describes a particular type of father/son relationship. Either way, the particular (this story) is evidence that points to a general trend (something the author is trying to argue about father/son relationships in general).

Your task is to 1) describe the father/son relationship in all of its complexity (one paragraph), and 2) given the nature of this relationship, what does it imply about such relationships in general (another paragraph)? There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.

personification

Though the river is never personified by Rosa in the story, it might as well be since it is treated almost as another character in the text, especially by the narrator.

Since this was obviously the intent of Rosa, particularly given the narrator's closing words, the question becomes how does Rosa characterize the river? If it cannot be said to have actual motives, it certainly is given different associations in different circumstances, and it means different things to different characters.

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Your task is to 1) describe the characteristics of the river (as determined by the attitudes and actions of the other characters; I am not looking for physical characteristics) (one paragraph), and 2) use this description to explain how, as a character, the river helps drive the action of the story (another paragraph). There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.



paradox

One of the most consistent observations of critics about the story is the manner in which the father both abandons the family, yet paradoxically still remains its head. His influence, in some ways, seems almost to grow by his absence.

In fact, though he has abdicated his responsibilities as parent, for the narrator he is both a moral example and a father figure-- so much so that he comes close to following his father's example (and feels that he is betraying him when he does not fulfill his promise).

Your task is to 1) describe as precisely as possible this paradox (the two contradictory ideas) (one paragraph), and 2) given the paradoxical nature of the father's influence in the story, what is Rosa trying to communicate to the reader about the way/s people influence others? There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.

oxymoron

Near the end of page 3, the narrator says, "It wasn't exactly accurate but it was a truthful sort of lie" (speaking of his father's influence on his life and decisions).

This concept (where the "truth" is a "lie" and a "lie" is the "truth") could be used to describe many situations and attitudes in the story (insofar as appearances and reality are somehow at odds in interesting ways).

Your job is to 1) describe the scope of the "truthful" lies in the story (or its opposite: "untrue" truths), and 2) given this trend in the story, describe what Rosa seems to be arguing about the nature of truth or the nature of appearances. There should be at least two quotations from the story somewhere in these two paragraphs.