**‘Explaining Death to the Dog’ – Susan Perabo***Discuss the effectiveness of the ways in which Susan Perabo presents the mother’s grief in this story.*

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| **Characterization**   * wry humour – “whom they had been mourning for a good seven or eight days”. * isolated from husband – “He wanted away, wanted to get busy again” – don’t deal with grief the same way. Doesn’t feel able to share with him – “I didn’t have the courage to…wake him up and force him to share the grief”. Isn’t able to comfort him – “I had a desire…didn’t have the heart”. Keen to get back on track – “So we’re not going out?” – but not sure how to find a ‘new normal’. * socially excluded – “no-one wants to have lunch with me”. * does a lot of talking but doesn’t get a response – she is reaching out but unsuccessfully – when she does get a response she is judged (“Why would you think something like that?” * “I woke up and heard the baby crying” – has not yet accepted the death * “What to do with the baby dead?” – no sense of purpose * Never names the baby – shrinking from reality. | **Setting**   * “empty driveway” – husband is absent. * “The house was quiet. Still, very still” – no life. Stillness and silence represents the death of the child. * Baby’s room “empty, except for one chair…cleaned it out…too sad”. Emptiness reflects the emptiness of the narrator, and also her powerlessness – it was “Todd and the relatives” who had cleared the room. * Weather – pathetic fallacy – “The morning was cool and dark…ugly out”. Should be spring-like (spring is a time of potential and new life) but weather being against “natural order” reflects that the death of a child is against the “natural order”; also reflects the grief of the narrator. |
| **Symbolism**   * narrator uses the dog as a means of processing her grief; her emotions are projected onto him and he becomes a symbol of the grieving process: “imperative…understand and accept”; “you could tell he was looking for the baby”; reading to him; “I was trying to figure out how to get it across to him that she’s not coming back”; squirrel incident – “something he wasn’t near ready for”, “Stu backed away” – shows lack of readiness to accept the loss. * Dog’s ‘emotions’ mirror narrator: “he didn’t raise his head”, “blank”, “eyes didn’t focus” – lack of effect. * At climax narrator gives up – “I realized he would never understand death. All he would come to understand was that the baby was not coming back” – she has accepted her loss. * Food also symbolic: “well-meaning casseroles”, “two whole hams” – narrator has practical but not emotional support. | **Structure**   * opening (1st 2 paragraphs) sets up story: main theme (“After the baby died…”); main symbol (“my German Shepherd Stu understand and accept…”); 1st person narrator as main character. Blunt, matter-of-fact tone – life has been reduced to bare essentials. Lack of emotion – she is numb. * 1st person narrator allows for the idiosyncratic approach to be accessible to the reader. * Key incident – the squirrel. Again, blunt tone. “Perfectly whole” – contrast with narrator, who is no longer whole having lost her child. Stu’s reaction shows narrator is not yet ready to accept her loss. * Climax – “I woke again in the middle of the night, but I didn’t hear any crying”; “I realized he would never understand death”. Has accepted the baby is gone. Recalls the crying heard earlier in the story. |