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Birds of a Feather Fall Together

When you pass an abandoned mansion, do you see a creepy haunted house or an intriguing historical home? Your view of the mansion depends on its atmosphere—the mood surrounding it. The same can be said of a short story—a story’s mood influences the readers’ feelings about the story itself. In “The Scarlet Ibis,” James Hurst uses diction, point of view, and symbolism to create a mood of tragedy, sadness, and loss.

Throughout the story, the author creates the mood through diction, a stylistic device. The narrator begins his story with a play on words: “It was in the clove of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree.” The unusual word choice “clove” means not only the split between the two seasons—an in-between time—but the heavy aroma of cloves, a fragrant spice sometimes used for medicinal purposes. The choice of
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“bleeding tree”—probably a Dracaena draco palm, recognizable because of its red, weeping sap—is on one level an expression for a particular kind of tree, but on another level an image of danger or sickness. Both examples of diction foreshadow the trouble ahead. Their importance becomes clearer when the phrase “a clove of seasons” is repeated later in the story and when the scarlet ibis arrives and falls from the “bleeding tree.”

In the first paragraph, the narrator describes the flowers around his childhood home as “stained with rotting brown magnolia petals” and “graveyard flowers.” He describes an abandoned bird’s nest as “an empty cradle.” Even the scent of the flowers that surround him is described as “speaking softly the names of our dead.” This complex description refers to the aspects of nature with words that remind the reader of death. Hurst is creating an atmosphere of approaching tragedy. Because the story revolves around the relationship between the narrator and his frail brother, Doodle, the mood created in the first paragraph makes the reader worry about Doodle’s future.
However, the dark mood is counterbalanced by descriptions of beauty. For example, the narrator’s details create a Garden of Eden environment. When the narrator and his brother Doodle play in Old Woman Swamp, the narrator “would gather wildflowers, wild violets, honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, snakeflowers, and waterlilies, and with wire grass [would] weave them into necklaces and crowns.” In this setting, the two brothers are “beyond the touch of the everyday world.” The precise naming of so many flowers creates the image that the brothers are in a magic world, where no harm can come to them. Yet in that Garden of Eden, the narrator's “knot of cruelty” causes him to tease his brother and frighten him. Once when the narrator takes Doodle to the barn, a screech owl—a bird sometimes associated with death—flies out and frightens Doodle, causing him to cry, “Don’t leave me. Don’t leave me.” Those very simple words reinforce the bitter mood of sadness and impending doom. Even if the brothers live in an in-between time and play in a Garden of Eden, the narrator’s “knot of cruelty” will bring doom to both of them.
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<th>Key point: point of view</th>
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<td>When the narrator tells this story, he is trying to untangle the knot.</td>
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<td>The point of view from which the story is told also influences its mood. Everything the reader knows about the relationship between the brothers comes directly from the first-person point of view of the narrator. The narrator is an older person looking back to his past to tell the story of his brother, for whose death he feels responsible. The narrator confesses both his positive and negative feelings for his brother. In his first description of Doodle, he refers to his brother as “nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams” and yet also as “a disappointment.” The narrator loves his brother, but is disappointed in him because of his physical disabilities. This mixture of disappointment and love fueled the narrator’s actions towards his brother, and now he feels grief and guilt over the results.</td>
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<td>The point of view helps explain the narrator’s mixed feelings about his brother. In one way, the narrator feels as if he has created his brother. He has given him the sweet, silly pet</td>
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name “Doodle,” because when his little brother finally learned to crawl, he crawled backward like a doodlebug. By persistence and heroic stubbornness, the narrator taught his brother to walk—a seemingly impossible action given the physical limitations of Doodle. The narrator reluctantly admits that Doodle is better at “lying,” or telling stories. The narrator can tell pointless, scary stories, but Doodle’s are imaginative, filled with people who have wings and can fly. Doodle’s favorite story to tell is about a boy named Peter who has a golden robe and a beautiful pet peacock who protects him with her “iridescent” ten-foot tail. Everything the narrator says about Doodle reveals his beauty, grace, and innocence.

While the narrator appreciates those qualities on one level, he also feels that Doodle is a burden. Despite his pride in his brother as his own creation, the narrator feels resentful and angry at Doodle’s dependence upon him. The narrator admits, “Doodle was my brother, and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did . . .” The narrator’s point of view suggests that impatience, anger, and cruelty present constant
Key point: symbolism

Dangers to beauty, grace, and innocence, such as Doodle represents. In spite of the peaceful mood of the Old Woman Swamp, the place where the narrator teaches his brother to walk, the narrator consistently hints that the mood is always one of impending doom.

The most direct way readers understand the story’s mood is through the symbolism of the many birds of the story, particularly the scarlet ibis. In several tales, birds are associated with a person’s soul or spirit, sometimes symbolizing the struggle between good and evil. Birds appear throughout this story. In folklore, screech owls, like the one that flies out of the coffin to frightened Doodle, signal a coming death or disaster. Peacocks, such as Peter’s companion in Doodle’s story, are proud, noble birds, associated in Greek mythology with Hera, the queen of the gods. Peacocks are also associated with death and immortality. Even hawks and chickens become symbolic, when the narrator compares the storm damage to the oak trees to a hawk tearing the entrails out of a chicken.

With the arrival of the scarlet ibis, the mood in the short
story becomes gloomier. A storm, the same kind of fierce
storm that has destroyed the cotton crop and uprooted the oak
trees, has blown the bird out of its natural place into the
bleeding tree in the narrator’s front yard. His family is
fascinated by it until the dying bird falls to the ground, its
“long, graceful neck” straightening and its feet “delicately
curved at rest.” The narrator explains: “Even death did not mar
its grace, for it lay on the earth like a broken vase of red
flowers, and we stood around it, awed by its exotic beauty.”
Doodle’s association with the scarlet ibis is clearly established
when the young boy buries the scarlet ibis alone and with great
trouble and care. He drags the ibis to the front yard, singing a
hymn, and digging a hole with a shovel twice as big as he is.
He is both a humorous and tragic figure, since only he really
appreciates the beauty and loss that the scarlet ibis represents
and gives the once beautiful and graceful ibis the dignity it
deserves by burying it.

When Doodle dies a short time later, probably from
exhaustion and heart failure after his brother abandons him in
another frightening storm with horrible lightning and rain, his limp neck looks “unusually long and slim,” and his legs are “bent sharply at the knees.” The blood from Doodle’s mouth colors his neck and shirt red like the bird’s feathers. The connection between the ibis and Doodle becomes even clearer as the narrator cries over his brother, referring to him as “my fallen scarlet ibis.” Doodle, like the bird, is a rare and fragile creature who could not survive the harshness of life. The symbolic relationship between the ibis and Doodle creates sympathy and compassion for the frail boy and helps the reader understand why the narrator suffers grief and guilt over Doodle’s death.

In “The Scarlet Ibis,” the author uses diction, point of view, and symbolism to create a gloomy, somber mood. Through diction, Hurst gives us an overwhelming sense that something sad is going to happen. Through point of view, we come to understand how the narrator’s conflicted feelings about his deceased brother have brought him grief and guilt. Finally, through symbolism, we see the tragic fate of fragile
creatures in our harsh world. By presenting this complex relationship, James Hurst helps all readers better explore their own feelings about love and cruelty and about loyalty and loss.