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Eng. 615
First Essay (Rewrite)
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Conditional Love *> in what?
which work?*

Among contemporary short stories are those which focus on familial relationships. Through the success or failure of love we see how the characters' lives are thus affected. Saul Bellow's "A Silver Dish" immediately comes to mind. Woody Selbst, Bellow's protagonist, finds himself, at age sixty, reflecting about life with his father just after the old man has died. Woody is mournful, but he also knows he must, "As Woody put it, be realistic." (p. 39) And what Bellow reveals to us is a recollection of love that is sincere, nostalgic--and one-sided.

Early on we learn that any relationship with Morris, Woody's father, is founded only on Morris's getting whatever he wants. Though not religious, Morris has previously made Woody promise to "bury him among Jews" (p. 41), and while Woody keeps his promise, the burial scene shows mixed emotions. In a gesture of love, Woody has Morris wear a special shirt that Woody had bought in Honolulu. And, rather than allow anyone else to dress his father, Woody comes to the funeral parlor and buttons "the stiff into the shirt himself... the old man went down looking like Ben-Gurion in a simple wooden coffin, sure to rot fast. That was how Woody wanted it all." (p. 41) Thus, combined with the tenderness in laying his father to rest is an emotionless, businesslike expediency to get the job done. And, after the job is done, we see Woody going back to Morris's house to comfort Halina, the woman for whom Morris had abandoned his family, the woman who, after more than forty years, remained "true blue, al-

Can a scene show mixed emotions?

or does the language yield an emotive quality?

or does the scene, reveal Woody's mixed emotions about his father?

ways one hundred percent for Morris." (p. 41)

But just what it is about Morris, besides being Woody's father, that makes his son so unflaggingly loyal is both obvious and puzzling. To Woody, who, at fourteen, gives his father the money he needs to move out, Morris is something of a romantic hero. Woody is well aware of his father's weak sense of responsibility and strong attraction to vice, but he chooses to ignore all the warnings he hears about Morris. Woody, instead, sees his father's gambling as "petty stuff: Pop's sinning was on a boy's level and therefore made a big impression on a boy." (p. 43) Perhaps, too, Woody is learning, at his young age "the ways of Chicago, which came so natural that nobody thought to question them." (p. 45) Still, one cannot help but wonder why Woody doesn't eventually take a different stand toward his father's demands. By the time he is only in his late teens, Woody has been forced to become "the man of the house," live on welfare, and steal food to survive, all thanks to Morris, who expresses how guilty he feels with his bon mot "That'll teach you to trust your father." (p. 43) Nevertheless, Woody, certainly attuned to his father's conniving, always acquiesces to Morris's desires. Woody recognizes that his father "was like the man in the song: he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it." (p. 50) As a loving son, then, Woody takes it upon himself to provide.

However, being the dutiful son that Woody is still does not merit any reciprocal form of love from Morris. And as we join Woody, on the brink of his senior years, sadly recounting his life, we observe the one thing he does not provide--fatherhood. Although we do learn that Woody has an ex-wife and a mistress, there is no

yes that comes through

good where

mention anywhere about children or the attempt to provide grand-^{diction} children for Morris. It is interesting to speculate whether or not Morris would have wanted grandchildren or whether or not Woody would have wanted to make Morris, a man who only took and never gave, a grandfather. Perhaps, too, Woody already has enough dependents; his making the rounds to do his ex-wife's shopping, be with Helen (his mistress), or spend every Saturday night with his mother renders him "too busy to attend his own feelings...Under his breath he occasionally said, 'Oh, Pop'" (p. 41) Whatever father/son bond Morris and he shared is over; whatever father/son bond that could have lived on will never be.

Similarly absent from Woody's life is the silver dish whose theft, by Morris, is the basis for the story's title. That scene shows Woody, ever accommodating, allowing himself to be dragged out, in a raging blizzard, to the home of Mrs. Skoglund, a wealthy benefactor of Woody, so that Morris can ask for a loan of fifty dollars. Morris's rationale is simple: "The old broad wants to adopt you, doesn't she? Shouldn't I get something out of it for my trouble?" (p. 47) Woody has no argument against that kind of logic. However, while Mrs. Skoglund is upstairs, ruminating and praying about her decision, Morris pilfers a silver dish "worth dough" from a cabinet. In the story's climactic moment, Woody, mortified by his father's behavior and terrified that he will get "in Dutch" with Mrs. Skoglund, grabs hold of his father and tries unsuccessfully to wrestle away the dish. Pathetically they grapple over more than just the object; it is a battle of wills, and Morris, of course, is the winner. He leaves Mrs. Skoglund's not only with a fifty-dollar

check, but also with the dish, which, though he tells Woody he has returned, he ^{no parenthesis} "decades later" confesses to have hocked. Again they must brave the blizzard outside, but it is only Woody who gets snowed under. *maybe play off of this phrase*

But the significance of the silver dish to Woody's relationship with his father becomes clear to Woody only after Morris has died. Woody remembers Morris's attitude, the morning after the theft, "Well, I don't give a care, if you want to know." (p. 57) The dish, Woody realizes, is just one more obeisance of love he, willingly or not, must make to a father who cares only for the object's monetary value, not for the predicament in which the theft entangles Woody. Since he remains loyal to his father, Woody allows himself to be blamed and, accordingly, suspended from the seminary. Morris's reaction, no surprise to Woody, is "So what, kid?" (p. 57)

Still, in his own way, Woody grieves as he sits in his apartment. There is no show of emotion as Sunday church bells chime and Woody envisions his father, freshly planted. He remembers a scene he once saw on an African expedition; a buffalo calf, in the presence of its parents, is dragged underwater by a crocodile and drowned. Woody thinks now, as he thought then, that although they were only dumb animals, "there was pain in this, he read brute grief into it." (p. 40) Morris's death leaves Woody as dumfounded as the cattle that watched the calf disappear. The difference is that Woody experiences his father's death. He climbs into bed with Morris to restrain the old man from pulling out the intravenous needles. He watches "Willful Pop" die, anyway ("Loss of heat was the way he did it."). And he personally shovels the dirt that

*doesn't
Morris
steal
much
more than
the silver
dish?*

*Woody
snowed
under?*

*✓
added*

forever covers the man "You could never pin down." (p. 62)

Thus, in "A Silver Dish" Saul Bellow presents a father and son who are perfect for each other. First we have Morris, whose life, though a study in self-promotion, touches the people who serve his needs. Those few, especially Halina and Woody, acknowledge that it is "the selfish people who are loved the most. They do what you deny yourself, and you love them for it. You give them your heart." (p. 58) Then we have Woody, who, even by his father's admonition, is a too-easy target ("You take too much on yourself."). He is the son who must provide for his father without expectation of anything in return. But, finally, he comes to a realization when, at sixty, he knows how much he is going to miss the man who has furnished a unique kind of love under one condition: Woody could scarcely ever sense its presence, but in its absence he is truly alone.

AL- Your writing
is a relief to
read. You show
good style and
insight - and
care in the
craft.
A