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Mr Leo

English 10 Block D

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Boys Will Be Boys, or Will Boys Be Rats in “Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump”?

Sometimes the activities enjoyed by adolescents seem to foreshadow their fates. In the free verse poem, “Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump,” by David Bottoms, imagery of drunkenness, ironic contrasts between light and darkness as metaphors, and an analogy between boys and rats reveal young men who are so alienated from their own future that they can only imagine being either dead or crippled.

Intoxication imagery runs throughout the poem, revealing the poor decision-making skills of the protagonists. The narrator of the poem emphasizes the drunkenness of the “carloads” (2) of boys who go to shoot rats from the beginning of the poem to the very end. In line one they are “loaded on beer and whiskey,” the boys ride in “carloads,” and in the final line “we drink and load again” (14). “Load” is a pun that refers to putting bullets in the gun and drinking alcohol, establishing a link between drunkenness and senseless violence common in the lives of the doomed boys. Even the rats who are shot in the head “lie still like dead beer cans,” a simile that offers another alcohol reference (6). The boys empty the cans, making them “dead,” little realizing that their drinking will ultimately lead to their own deaths.

In addition to the drunken point of view, the contrasts between light and dark begin literal but end up symbolic of choices in the lives of the boys, suggesting that they are doomed. In line three, the boys “turn our headlights across the wasted field,” revealing that the setting is night and that the boys bring light into the scene. Later the rats “drag themselves on forelegs across our

beams of light toward the darkness at the edge of the dump” (10-11). “Our” light suggests that the boys have both turned on the headlights but are also responsible for the possibility of good options because light usually has positive connotations, such as knowledge. Ironically, the rats fear the light: “It’s the light they believe kills” (12), meaning that they fear the boys, who expose them in the light only to shoot them. For the rats, light is not good and they try to escape it. For the boys, knowledge is not good enough for them to escape their fates.

But in the final analogy, the narrator achieves a little understanding (“light”) realizing that he and his friends are like the rats, and that the boys, while sitting in the dark behind the beams of the headlights, are doomed to darkness like the rats. The narrator says of the rats: [we] “let them crawl for all they’re worth into the darkness we’re headed for” (13-14). The verb “crawl” is an example of personification, since only animals on two legs can do it, and reinforces one the link between the rats and the boys (13). Ironically, while the rats crawl to escape the “light they believe kills,” (13) the boys are already placed in the “darkness at the edge of the dump,” behind the headlights of their cars (11). The narrator’s awareness of the similarities between the rats and the boys makes it clear that he believes that the human drunkenness and violence make the boys doomed to a future in which they will die or be crippled in some way, just like the rats they kill and maim.

The motif of alcohol imagery, the literal and figurative imagery of light and darkness, and the analogy between the rats and the boys reveal a moment in which the narrator glimpses a doomed future without hope. We can only hope that these boys find other activities to enjoy that might suggest more positive futures available to them.