

V. Person

AP Literature and Composition

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Edgar's Moral Reconciliation in Wroblewski's *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*

In a person's final moments before death, moral reconciliation, not revenge, brings inner peace. Wroblewski subtly crafts this theme into the ending of his Hamlet-like novel, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*.

Tragically, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* ends with the mute protagonist, Edgar, lying on the floor of a burning barn and dying from the poison his Uncle Claude subversively injects into Edgar with a hidden syringe; while not a traditional "happy ending," the finale does offer the reader lasting satisfaction because "even at death," Edgar makes peace with himself and cleanses himself of the metaphorical mind poison he suffers as a result of his father Gar's murder. Midway through the novel, Edgar flees home at his mother Trudy's insistence when events begin to unravel, weeks after his father suspiciously dies on the barn floor. Because Edgar has literally been unable to make a telephone call to save his father, he bares guilt, not realizing that his Uncle Claude is the true villain all along; Claude surreptitiously murders his brother, Gar, and makes the death appear as an aneurysm.

Using plot devices such as Gar's ghost, the visionary Ida Paine and the companionship of the Sawtelle dogs, Wroblewski creates the quintessential quest for Edgar that ends with his epiphany that he must return home and uncover the truth of his father's death and legacy. Edgar does indeed come home but as tragic, unstoppable events unfold beyond his control, he determines that the best way to honor his father's life is not to seek revenge against Claude. He knows that seeking retribution by trying to kill Claude or reveal

him as a perpetrator of fratricide may create sweet revenge but that revenge will not provide lasting satisfaction and inner peace. Instead, Edgar seeks to preserve the kennel records of the Sawtelle dogs, even when doing so requires Edgar to put his own life at risk and eventually sacrifice it. Edgar honors his father Gar and what Gar stood for in his life by this sacrifice. Because the barn where the records are housed is on fire, Edgar heroically begins grabbing records, loading them in a wheelbarrow and carting them outside, beyond the reach of the flames. During that process, Uncle Claude, desperate to keep Edgar from revealing the truth, commits the evil act of sticking the syringe full of poison into Edgar. Edgar quickly falls and spends his last few minutes reassessing his life's choices and mistakes.

In these dying moments, Edgar sees the ghost of his dog Almondine, his companion from birth on. Edgar looks through the smoke and mouths the words, "I love you" to Almondine to atone for his betrayal of her. Earlier, Edgar abandons Almondine, leaving her behind when he ventures on his quest because he is angry with her. When he returns home, he is eager to reunite with her since he has realized that she has in fact been faithful to him all along; sadly, he returns home to find Almondine's grave, and he grieves deeply. He recalls how Almondine nosed him while he was still in the crib; she had protected him; she had provided friendship for him; she had loved him, and he had mistakenly forsaken that when he left her behind. But his tragic last words show that it is never too late to reconcile. He is at peace in his death because he has reunited with Almondine. And Edgar is paradoxically freed from guilt and grief about his father's death when he dies because he knows that he has saved the Sawtelle records. The legacy of the Sawtelle dogs and all his family's hard work through the generations will live on because the records have survived.

Edgar is set free through his death. Far from the stereotypical “happy ending,” the ending of *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* satisfies the reader because we are comforted knowing that Edgar was at peace in his final moments. Life does not always afford one the luxury of having such moments to reassess one’s life and put one’s mind at ease; when a novel does provide this extravagance, readers respond with gratitude. Readers are assured because Edgar dies knowing that “it is well with his soul.”