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## Lesson

### Mosquito

John Updike

#### Background and Purpose

In the Preface to his *Collected Poems 1953–1993*, American writer John Updike says that writing poetry is for him “the highest kind of verbal exercise—the most satisfying. . . .” Justly famous for his many novels and admired for the wit and ingenuity of both his more serious poetry and his light verse, Updike says, “My poems are my oeuvre’s beloved waif.” Updike reveals in his notes that he is well aware that only female mosquitoes bite, needing protein-rich blood to mature their eggs. He explains that he tried the pronouns *she* and *it*, but that either of these choices “diminishes the music of the lines and falsifies the subjective experience.” The mosquito felt, to the male poet as he lay there, “like a male antagonist. . . .” He nearly omitted the poem from the collection because the *he* makes it “hopelessly marred,” but did not want to lose “the last two, gender-free stanzas.”

### Mosquito

On the fine wire of his whine he walked,  
Unseen in the ominous bedroom dark.  
A traitor to his camouflage, he talked  
A thirsty blue streak distinct as a spark.

Line

5 I was to him a fragrant lake of blood  
From which he had to sip a drop or die,  
A reservoir, a lavish field of food,  
I lay awake, unconscious of my size.

10 We seemed fair-matched opponents. Soft he dropped  
Down like an anchor on his thread of song.  
His nose sank thankfully in; then I slapped  
At the sting on my arm, cunning and strong.

A cunning and strong Gargantua, I struck  
This lover pinned in the feast of my flesh  
15 Lulled by my blood, relaxed, half-sated, stuck,  
Engrossed in the gross rivers of myself.

Success! Without a cry the creature died,  
Became a fleck of fluff upon the sheet.  
The small welt of remorse subsides as side  
20 By side we, murderer and murdered, sleep.

—John Updike

### Using Skills to Understand the Poem

1. Explain what the details in the poem reveal about the speaker, setting, occasion, conflict, and purpose of the poem.
2. What can we discover about the protagonist through both direct and indirect characterization? What motivates his actions and feelings?
3. Analyze any three of the similes and metaphors in the poem. Is there a pattern in the vehicles used? Are they appropriate to the purposes of the poem? How are the protagonist's feelings displayed through the choice of figurative language?
4. What tone is produced by the sound devices in the poem? Consider the uses and effect of rhyme, meter, metrical substitutions, enjambment, caesura, alliteration, assonance and consonance, and choose one example of each to comment on. What is the overall effect of the sound of the poem in relation to its meaning: is the sound primarily euphonious or cacophonous?

### Essay Question

This poem is of a type called mock heroic, which uses the lofty and exalted style of an epic for a trivial subject, thus giving it a dignity it does not deserve. How do setting, plot, characters, and especially diction, create a mocking tone, one which ridicules the deeds related by comparing them with the high deeds of proud heroes in epic poems?

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13 **Gargantua:** a gigantic man in a satiric work by Rabelais (French writer in the sixteenth century)