"I WISH THE OLD MAN WOULD JUST KICK OFF"

Martin Sonnenberg

[Assignment: Write an essay of comparison-contrast, trying especially to establish the reasons for looking at these two together. Be sure to use similar characteristics in your descriptions and analyses and place them in meaningful relation to one another. Ask yourself: what more do I know about each element by seeing it in relation to the other? Make your people/places/things unmistakable and unforgettable; involve your audience in the action you detail.]

(1) "I wish the old man would just kick off," Sam drawled through his chewing tobacco as we bounced down the highway on the way back to the main farm. I slid off the vinyl seat and started toward my grandparents' house and my noontime meal. The midday Oklahoma sun felt hot on my shoulders and neck as I kicked through the gravel driveway, sandy dust rising up and coating the inside of my nose and mouth. As I was washing up for the daily meal of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, I overheard my grandfather complain to my grandmother, "Mildred, I just don't understand the way Sam thinks. That boy is so unpredictable."

(2) For the past three summers, I have worked on my grandfather's farm in Alva, Oklahoma, and felt the tension increase between my grandfather and his main help, Sam Flaming. They disagree on how the farm should be run and how much they should gamble. My grandfather feels that Sam is too young and irresponsible to run a farm, while Sam feels my grandfather is too old and senile to manage the operation.

(3) As Sam and I sit on the hood of the tractor, the setting sun turns the sky from orange to red to purple to dark, dark blue while we discuss the future. Sam has just run the tractor into knee-deep mud while plowing and we have to wait until my grandfather can come with another tractor to pull him out.

(4) "What kind of trucks should we get?" Sam questions.

(5) Not knowing a thing about the best kind of truck needed for cross country harvesting I respond, "Uhhh."

(6) "Okay, we'll get Peterbilts . . . five of them . . . painted red, white, and blue. . . and a parts truck . . . and four Allis-Chalmers N6 combines . . . and we'll cut wheat from Texas to Alberta and back again and we'll just rake in the money!"

(7) "Okay, sure, Sam," I say, again not knowing how to respond.

(8) "What in heaven's name does he think he is
doing," Sam screams as my grandfather drives the other tractor right across our wheat field toward our stranded tractor. "I think he’s gone senile and forgotten where the road is."

(9) The way Sam talks characterizes the way he thinks and the way he lives his life. He is young and full of hope for the future. He has a new wife, a new house, and a new set of triplets and his life has just begun. He has many plans for the future and they don’t include being a worker for anyone else. He sees anyone over fifty as incompetent, especially my grandfather. After my grandfather dies he wants to run the farm by himself, with help from his sons when they are old enough, and split the profits with the family. He wants to take risks so they can pay off and so he can make lots of money. Often he doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions until it is too late.

(10) "Mildred, I’m just not sure about buying the Massman place. I don’t know if we could handle it right now. I’m not going to farm forever, you know, and I don’t know if Sam is responsible enough to handle all of this by himself. Sometimes he acts like he is just as much of a kid as the triplets. He rides that three-wheeler like he is being chased by the devil himself," my grandfather said between bites of mashed potatoes.

(11) My grandfather’s words also say a lot about him. He doesn’t think Sam or anyone else without decades of experience can successfully run a farm. Unlike Sam, he doesn’t have dreams for the future, in fact, he is trying to decide how long to continue farming. He has more money now than he could possibly spend in the rest of his life, so he is now making money for his children and grandchildren.

(12) My grandfather and Sam have differences that make it difficult for them to work with each other. They both think that the other is unfit to run the farm by himself and they are probably both right. Sam needs my grandfather to make major decisions and keep him from making rash decisions that would be bad in the long run. My grandfather needs Sam to do most of the day to day work that my grandfather can no longer do. Despite their major differences and the tension between them, my grandfather and Sam have one thing in common: they want to do what is best for their families. This is the one thing that keeps them together despite the outward uneasiness between them.