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Unraveling Change: A Character’s Transformation

Knots are as common as air. They hold things together in a literal and metaphorical sense. According to *The Ashley Book of Knots* “there are 256 different ‘over-and-under’ arrangements possible.” Quoyle is a man waiting to be unraveled and tied down to something solid. The *Shipping News* (1993) a novelby E. Annie Proulx follows the life of Quoyle: a lowly nobody. After the death of his parents and his wife, Quoyle travels with his two daughters and aunt to Newfoundland, the home of their ancestry. Quoyle rebuilds himself as the family builds their new life in Killick-Claw. Proulx’s unique use of vivid imagery, varying syntax, careful irony, and powerful symbolism shows Quoyle’s transformation from a lowly man into a strong, loving, fatherly figure which the reader clearly understands through the psychoanalytical lens.

Proulx takes full advantage of imagery in her book. The imagery she uses throughout the novel develops and supports the interactions between Quoyle and the other characters. Interactions between characters do not merely start with dialogue but rather with unusual description. The description leads up to the interaction by providing background details on scenery and on the characters themselves. When Quoyle meets Diddy Shovel, the keeper of boat records, for the first time Proulx sets up the scene through her descriptions of the characters: “Sized him [Quoyle] up as strong and clumsy” (Proulx 79). Diddy Shovel’s thoughts build the language and relationship that happens in the conversation between Shovel and Quoyle.

There are multiple relationships happening in the novel not only between characters but also between characters and their surroundings. Quoyle and his family have a short-term relationship with their ancestral home on Quoyle’s Point. “They noticed sedgy grass in the centerline, a damp sink where a culvert had dropped, and, in the silted shoulders, hoofprints the size of cooking pots” (Proulx 40). In this scene Quoyle is making his way to his new home. The road, similar to the house, has not been traveled on for thirty years. The description gives the impression that the house is older and beaten down. This is seen through Quoyle’s point of view telling the reader how he views the house and his surroundings.

Not only does imagery set up relationships between characters, but the imagery also helps to set the mood, tone, and events throughout the novel. One particular scene that stands out is when Quoyle wakes up in the morning:

Quoyle woke in the empty room. Grey Light. A sound of hammering. His heart. He lay in his sleeping bag in the middle of the floor. The candle on its side. Could smell the wax, smell the pages of the book that lay open beside him, the dust in the floor cracks. Neutral light illumined the window. The hammering again and a beating shadow in the highest panes. A bird. (Proulx 103)

In this scene the reader feels the emptiness, the hollowness of the room. The concrete language, and varying syntax that Proulx uses sharpens the description. Instead of using a long sentence to describe the light in the room she uses a short to-the-point sentence that provides the reader with the same senses as Quoyle. The descriptions themselves are simple but the feelings they evoke are just as vivid as the longest sentence Proulx uses.

Furthermore, Proulx’s descriptions of weather changes add to the overall mood of the section and appeal to the reader’s senses. For example, Proulx does just this when describing a scene of nighttime on Quoyle’s Point. As the wind picks up and the weather becomes ominous the feeling of “hopeless abandonment” becomes prominent (Proulx 208). Proulx personifies the wind in this section using the word “moaned.” This little descriptor word draws the attention of the reader and gives the sense of a helpless cry. This hopeless cry is exactly what Quoyle experiences in his dreams after the death of his wife and parents.

Besides imagery, the varying syntax and word choices that Proulx uses enhances the setting of the book, as well as of Quoyle himself. Proulx carefully chooses her sentence lengths throughout the novel. She often switches from short, choppy sentences to lengthier, detailed sentences. This style of writing is known as a “journalistic style” which reflects the style of *The Gammy Bird*, the newspaper where Quoyle works. Also, throughout the novel Quoyle’s thoughts come through as a headliner such as “Stupid Man Does Wrong Thing Once More” (Proulx 89). This again puts emphasis on the journalistic style that Proulx uses (“The Shipping News”).

The other style that is expressed through Proulx’s syntax is a culturist style particular to the Newfoundland area. Characters such as Tert Card and Jack Buggit speak in long monologues; “their spontaneous monologues… strike us as Newfoundland’s most rollicking oral literature” (“Proulx, E. Annie (1935-)”). Another aspect of the area that Proulx refers to frequently is both the traditions and the superstitions. Specifically, Proulx references “The Old Hag” as well as “Stepmother’s breath” (Proulx). These two phrases, and many others that Proulx references, are common in the Newfoundland area (“The Shipping News”). The culturist style gives the reader a glimpse of what aids in Quoyle’s transformation, which is the change in culture from New York to Killick-claw.

Equally important is the use of situational irony to add humor and truth throughout the novel. Early in the novel, the reader learns that Quoyle is afraid of water and boats yet he moves to Newfoundland: an island where the main form of transportation is by water (Proulx 2). This use of situational irony is humorous to the reader, and creates an area for growth within Quoyle. As Quoyle is playing with his daughters, Sunshine tells Quoyle that he is water (Proulx 127). Sunshine does not realize that her father is afraid of water, adding humor and a light feeling to the event. The truth behind the ironic statement is that water is a common symbol of rebirth; Quoyle wants to find a new life, which is why he came to Killick-Claw. Proulx created young Sunshine to show and aid in Quoyle’s transformation.

One last significant employment of irony is the employees’ jobs at *The Gammy Bird*. At lunch one day, Nutbeem shares his feelings on *The Gammy Bird* and Jack Buggit to Quoyle. In his monologue, Nutbeem comments on the ironic nature of everybody’s beat, or assignment. Quoyle, whose wife died in a car wreck, takes pictures of a car wreck each week for the front page. Nutbeem, who was sexually abused as a child, writes up the sexual abuse column. Billy Pretty has never been married, and he writes the home news section. Tert Card cannot spell or use grammar correctly, and he is the managing editor (Proulx 221). The beats that each employee is put on are examples of how irony adds humor and truth to the novel.

In addition to irony, Proulx employs metaphors and symbols in her writing. *The Shipping News* is a story about a man finding his voice and finding a new life; the metaphors, and symbols employed within the novel help to reveal Quoyle as a dynamic, changing, character. At the climax of the novel, “Quoyle… finds a positions to speak from and words to speak with,” Quoyle comes out of his shell and stands up to Tert Card (Seiffert). Tert Card, the managing editor at *The Gammy Bird*, ruins Quoyle’s column on oil tankers because of their opposing views. Quoyle is so outraged by Tert’s actions that his voice is compared to an axe (Proulx 203). This is only the beginning for Quoyle’s life changing transformation.

Quoyle continues to grow throughout the novel by accepting his past mistakes and wanting to move forward rather than backward in his life, which makes him a dynamic character. For instance, Proulx uses a series of metaphors and comparisons to show how Quoyle has changed: “If life was an arc of light that began in darkness, ended in darkness, the first part of his life had happened in ordinary glare. Here it was as though [Quoyle] had found a polarized lens that deepened and intensified all seen through it” (Proulx 241). The last part of the quote really speaks to Quoyle’s transformation, how he views things on a deeper level and sees more than what is on the surface level.

Symbols are another strong aspect of the novel and of Quoyle’s growth. The green house symbolizes Quoyle. It is old, beaten down and, finally, fixed. The house and Quoyle, however, are tied by knots and cables to the ground, unmoving and unchanging, until Quoyle comes to a realization of his faults. From this point forward he begins to change until the final moment where his cables break and he is free: “That was it, in the house he felt he was inside a tethered animal, dumb but feeling” (Proulx 263). The knots that are repeated throughout the novel, not only in the chapter titles but also within the plot line, symbolize Quoyle and his attachment to his old life as well as to his new life (Whitehead). The knot of Quoyle’s new life becomes stronger where as the knot of Quoyle’s past finally breaks when the cables of the green house snap (“The Shipping News”).

By looking at the novel through the psychoanalytical lens the reader is able to see and understand Quoyle’s transformation on a deeper level. Through this particular lens the reader sees how Quoyle’s issues such as his life at home, the death of his wife, and the death of his parents, have shaped Quoyle’s id, super ego, and ego and have caused Quoyle to act as though he is tied down and can only find love in pain.

Quoyle’s id yearns for love yet he feels he only deserves pain. Thus Quoyle marries Petal, an unfruitful relationship. After his time in Newfoundland, Quoyle sees that there is a chance for love without pain.

Due to issues as a young kid Quoyle’s super ego subconsciously forms Quoyle’s quite voice at the beginning of the book as well as his habit to cover his oddly proportioned chin. “The Wilderness Enhanced Model of Narrative Therapy” explains how the journey to Newfoundland reshaped Quoyle’s super ego by allowing him to reshape his level of thinking (Stolz).

Lastly Quoyle’s ego grows as he learns to make new decisions, experience new things, and improve his changing life (Stolz). This is all seen through Proulx’s development of Quoyle and through the psychoanalytical lens.

By using the psychoanalytical lens, the reader sees how Proulx uses imagery, syntax, irony, and symbolism to build Quoyle’s character throughout the novel. The imagery as well as syntax creates the mood. Additionally, the syntax forms the style of the novel as either journalistic or culturist. Irony is used to add truth and humor to the novel, especially at *The Gammy Bird*. The symbols that Proulx uses show Quoyle’s faults as he changes from a lowly man into a strong, loving fatherly figure.