Old School Literary Analysis

Sold by Patricia McCormick

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Part 1. TRADITIONAL PROMPT

Patricia McCormick uses symbolism to depict Lakshmi’s life of pain, endurance, and perseverance. To accomplish this, a wide range of techniques are utilized including elements of nature, and the complexity of human behavior. Using examples from the text, analyze McCormick’s use of symbolism and explain how it helps to propel the major theme of the text. Cite textual evidence to track Lakshmi’s journey that starts with innocence, despair, heartbreak, and finally, to freedom. Make sure to make connections to theme throughout your work.

Part 2. SCENARIO-BASED PROMPT

As part of the Language Arts Department Curriculum Night, you would like to have a gallery walk of images that depict Lakshmi’s journey from captivity to freedom. Each image ties into the unit theme of *perseverance* and will include a brief description below so that viewers who have not read the novel can have a clear understanding of what it represents. Your principal has read the novel and feels it is inappropriate because of its sexual content. Send an email to your principal convincing him or her that you can accomplish your goal of sharing this young adult novel in an after-school setting that provides a multi-genre format, and meets the rigor necessary for Common Core. The project will engage the students and provide an opportunity for Parents, Teachers and students to collaborate through discussions on an academic and friendly level. Assure the principal (provide him or her with samples) that the images you use will not be explicit, but will effectively convey the theme of the novel. Also include some sample discussion questions that parents, students, and teachers will participate in.

Part 3. ESSAY

Lakshmi survives betrayal, torment, and sexual abuse at the hands of demented people. Despite this, she is determined to live and have a normal life. To help the reader along Lakshmi’s journey, Patricia McCormick uses symbolism to paint the picture of devastation, despair, and resolution. She uses elements of nature and the characteristics of man to help add color to the landscape of this artwork. The theme, *perseverance*, lingers behind Lakshmi like a shadow filtering out positive light. Through each tragedy, the reader is inspired to believe the impossible – that Lakshmi’s life will have a positive end.

With this hope we also embrace the fact that nothing is easy for her. When we first see her, instead of playing around the house like a normal Nepal teenager, she is worried about her thatched roof, having fresh water and what she will have for her next meal. McCormick immediately begins the novel by foreshadowing the devastation that is soon to come. Right now, Lakshmi is contemplating the cost needed to help purchase a tin roof for her family. A tin roof symbolizes financial stability and having the basic comforts of life. In the meantime, the reader is introduced to Lakshmi’s shameful, lazy stepfather who has a withered arm symbolizing their dysfunctional family unit and the crippling effects of Lakshmi’s future. There is a glimmer of hope, though, in the image of the goat. His presence represents productivity and positive companionship for Lakshmi. However, McCormick quickly pulls in the looming deadly blue sky to cast a dark shadow on the future.

One of the most powerful quotes in the novel is when Ama says, “Simply to endure is to triumph.” (p 16). McCormick is preparing the reader for the shocking realities of this factually based novel, and at the same time Ama is preparing her daughter for the horrors that lie ahead. In the latter part of the novel, Lakshmi reiterates this statement as if to say she has come full circle. At the present time, it’s the Monsoon that causes complete devastation for Lakshmi’s family. For Lakshmi, the Monsoon symbolizes the end of life as she knows it and the beginning of her journey toward a life of prostitution. In the aftermath, the monsoon ends up symbolizing the death of her current way of life, the complete decimation of her family’s possessions, and the ushering in of hopelessness. A shift has taken place and something is about to change.

The innocent mountain girl is met by a ‘city woman” who attempts to entice and seduce her with the promise of beautiful clothes and a comfortable way of life. McCormick uses the city woman’s shawl to further indicate seduction and temptation as she hides part of her face from Lakshmi. She represents evil that is preying on the innocence of youth. For Lakshmi, the woman symbolizes “possibility”, the possibility that there is a better life outside of her mountainous, dirt-paved region. She relishes the idea of working as a maid and being able to send money to her family, and yearns for a life where she is allowed to dress in fine clothes and eat fresh fruits. But life is never that simple.

McCormick continues to use the characters to paint the landscape of her novel. The stepfather’s physical handicap is nothing compared to the destructive decisions he makes that negatively impact the family. The dysfunctional *metal beast* he wins while gambling away the family’s money, symbolizes his ignorance and lack of judgment. We listen as “the metal beast coughs, and great blasts of smoke come from its tail” and realize something is about to die (p 45). There is devastation in Lakshmi’s future and her stepfather is the source. In fact, her life is now symbolized by a dollar amount - $800.00. There is an uneasiness that builds within the reader as you start to predict what lies ahead for her. Her life does have value, but to whom and at what cost to her?

As Lakshmi begins her pilgrimage, McCormick pulls in nature and the senses to further enhance the text. The scent of tobacco, the sounds of wagons, the chatter of voices, and the smell of animals permeate the atmosphere of the city. Lakshmi has entered this modern world “where chaos turns into order the way letters turn into words” (p 68). She is a long way from her flooded out, mud patched home. In the new world she has Auntie, Uncle Husband, and her place among the women that relieve themselves in public, all symbolizing varied levels of shame. This new world also includes provocatively dressed women, cell phones, and trains. It is amazing that Lakshmi’s character still has not realized the severity of her situation and her innocence makes the situation that more heartbreaking. She is still hoping to see the city with roofs made of gold.

Instead, she finds herself in the slums of India, where an infinite number of huts made from metal, car parts, and paper, welcome her to her new neighborhood. This is not what she pictured as the location of her new position as maid. The filth in the air, laced with heavy smoke, symbolizes the contamination filling her mind and spirit. Lakshmi is breathing this negativity in. She notes the provocatively dressed women and seedy men that fill the streets and she says, “I am afraid of this city where the lying-down people look like the dead. And the standing-up ones, like the walking dead” (p 88). The deplorable conditions of her new surroundings are just the beginning of the downward spiral of her life.

Lakshmi’s is slowly transforming from the innocent, 13-year old hill girl, to the desperate prostitute trying to pay off her debt. In the initial transformation, McCormick changes her appearance by having her head cut with shears to represent the transformation from normal to abnormal. She also uses sound to emphasize the deep pain Lakshmi feels and she expresses this through piercing screams when she is locked in the room. Her incarceration symbolizes powerlessness, hopelessness, and submission. You can feel the overwhelming emotions of pain and suffering that Lakshmi is going through, and yet you can still sense her desire to not give up. This is important because it ties directly into the theme of perseverance.

Lakshmi’s is beaten mercilessly, starved for days, and has to mentally block out the smell of foods in order to survive. She also remembers the trick of swallowing spit for water. Lakshmi is determined to survive and not to become the unthinkable, and more importantly, she still has not accepted her situation. She tells Shahanna, “I will not do this disgraceful thing” (p 115). But even she is not strong enough for what is to come. The drugs and the “fish-lips” man are too powerful for her. McCormick carefully selects these words to describe the John’s lips because they represent: uncleanliness, rough-scaly skin, foul odor, uneven sharp, teeth, and slime. Now imagine *that* on top of you, penetrating you, and your body lying helpless and still. And yet, Lakshmi chooses not to let her current situation define who she is. She is determined to find a way to escape.

As the text progresses, the reader watches as she goes through numerous setbacks and loss, and McCormick’s use of language is piercing at times. At one point, Lakshmi refers to the numerous men she is forced to service and says, “The split me open” (p 123). These four simple words speak volumes to Lakshmi’s pain. This is done so that the reader can feel sympathize with her and support her quest for freedom. Lakshmi doesn’t give up, so we can’t give up on her. We watch as she unravels and inhales her bundle of belongings from home. The materials and their scent represent safety, security, and love, but the reality of freedom is a long way off. Despite this, she holds on.

Symbolism is also used to show the humanity of man. In numerous instances, McCormick includes random acts of kindness, mixed with acts of brutality, and this brings balance to the writing. When the young, American, John visits Lakshmi, she has a new experience. He holds her for an extended period of time after having sex, and Lakshmi welcomes the embrace. He thanks her – actually speaks to her, and for a moment, she feels like a person with value. She is not permanently numb. As a result, she longs for his return. Lakshmi, as well as the reader, is hoping that this symbol of hope and compassion will be her way out.

In another situation, Harish gives Lakshmi a pencil and she cries for the first time since her imprisonment. She says, “A tear is running down my cheek. It quivers a moment on the tip of my nose, then splashes onto my skirt, leaving a small, dark circle” (p 182). These are powerful descriptive words, where the tear symbolizes the physical and emotional pain that is drawing her spirit downward. The quivering symbolizes the uncertainty of her present situation and the future. The tear dangling on the tip of her nose signifies that she is barely hanging on and the least movement could make her crash to the ground. The splashing on her skirt demonstrates the destruction she has already endured, and the mark is a visual of the physical and emotional scars that now exist. Although all of the above has negative connotations, the tear and the pencil also represent hope.

Despite this, the reality of her situation is that she is still trapped and indebted to Mumtaz. Any inspiration that she the thought would arise from Monica’s experience falls flat. She is rejected by her family and comes back to a life of degradation. Harish’s situation makes Lakshmi’s pain even worse. He is forced to leave after Pushpa’s desperate cries for mercy are rejected by Mumtaz. She has no compassion for Pushpa as she grovels at her feet, leaving the reader with a burning image of a person in utter despair. Her body, positioned level to the ground, represents total defeat.

Yet, there is still a glimmer of hope. The random acts of kindness inspire Lakshmi to perform a selfish act for Harish. In fact, her response to his kindness helps her to realize that her heart is still receptive to the compassion of others. This experience helps her to endure and inspires her to give Harish a gift. What is significant about the gift is that she made it out of the shawl she brought from home. This was her most treasured item and she sacrificed it for his pleasure. To solidify the importance of this moment she says, “A piece of me has left Happiness House” (p 184).

McCormick continues to use symbolism throughout the novel to further the plot. After Monica is rejected by her family and returns to Happiness House, she gives Lakshmi a tattered rag doll. The rag doll represents innocence, youth, and joy. These are attributes Lakshmi is desperately trying to recover. Even though she may not be successful in attaining all three (e.g., innocence), the ragdoll is a positive force because its presence inspires Lakshmi to persevere.

Interestingly, her true savior comes in the form of a *queer-looking* man who asks a lot of questions, the key one being, “Do you want to leave here?” (p 247) Lakshmi is perplexed and focuses on the ultimate use of symbolism, the business card containing American words and the image of an eagle. Fear penetrates her bones, but boldness begins to rise to the surface. She knows the card and the stranger equates danger, but they can also lead to the freedom she desperately wants.

Throughout the novel McCormick uses symbolism and imagery to help the reader make connections to the text and to provide examples that support the theme. The symbolism introduces us to characters and situations that force Lakshmi into horrific situations and even get her to the point where she questions her self-image. Is she the girl from Nepal or a “monster” replicating the image of Mumtaz? She realizes she is not Mumtaz and her rescue at the hands of a foreignor seals that revelation.

Part 4. META ANALYSIS

When deciding on what to focus on for this assignment I was immediately drawn to symbolism because that is my favorite part of a literary text. McCormick made the experience of my analysis even more pleasurable because Sold is rich in symbolism. I am a visual person, and images pop into my head during conversations, when watching a television program (other than what is on the screen), and of course, when reading a novel or website. What I noticed about the symbolism in Sold is that it helped to push forward the theme. It was as if the symbolism were a linked fence that Lakshmi held on to and used it to propel herself forward. The symbolism also helped to define the characters in the novel in very distinct ways, for example, her stepfather wasn’t just lazy and chauvinistic, but his physical attributes also represented they type of man he was. The symbolism in the text also helped to place characters into categories of good vs. evil, and tormentor vs. hero.

As I examined each character, I attempted to introduce them through the descriptive language I used to represent the symbolism. In the beginning, I wanted to highlight the author’s use of nature in helping to form the foundation of Lakshmi’s current life and the foreshadowing of her future. Lakshmi’s life was literally washed away with the pounding rains of the Monsoon, and of course, this followed with numerous horrific events. However, I found that as I was analyzing the text, I had to be careful to not focus solely on the negative, but to also find and highlight positive symbolism used within the story. This was not difficult to do.

The most challenging part of this assignment was trying to avoid merely summarizing the text, and incorporating the majority of the examples of symbolism I saw. This is difficult because logically, you want to begin at the beginning of the story and move forward. This was also complicated by the need to show how the symbolism helped to move the plot, via the characters and setting, through the story. Another challenge was coming up with the scenario-based prompt. I wanted to create something that I could actually do at my school, and use predictable responses and conclusions to help me construct it. I thought about the Holocaust unit I did when teaching eighth grade and tweaked it to use Lakshmi’s story. If I were doing this in a real-life scenario, I would expand it further and implement a multi-cultural twist on it so that various ethnic groups that have struggled through a major event in history could be represented. I would attempt to do it from the perspective of a young adult, from that specific region, and conduct research to find out child heroes from various ethnicities and share their stories of perseverance. This would allow students to connect with positive images that look like them. It could possibly instill a sense of HOPE in the apathetic student who doesn’t believe they have worth.

Overall, I think the approach to creating a real-world scenario is effective, but this can be improved by requiring a multi-cultural twist to whatever the task is. Maybe through the text analysis, the assignment could also include a survey to be conducted based on high order questioning that provides data from real world situations. The survey could involve students that the grad student teaches, as well as colleagues at work. Students would be able to participate because you would select a novel that you would use as an extended text. To make it easier for the teachers, you could prepare a brief abstract of the novel, and let them use that information with their current background knowledge to respond to the survey. The data could be incorporated into the results of the Scenario-Based Prompt. In my case, the results could be displayed at the Curriculum Night I designed for my real-world situation. This would increase the challenge and rigor of the assignment.