

Name
Course
Semester (Quarter & Year)
Professor

Effective Loss in *Housekeeping* and *Solar Storms*

One cannot go through life without experiencing hardships at one time or another. Loss of a loved one, or of a culture, and a feeling of loneliness in the world are both emotional aspects of life as a human being. In books, it may be hard for an author to fully capture these emotional ideas. However, through extensive use of descriptiveness and style, both Linda Hogan and Marilynne Robinson manage to show their characters losses in two very interesting ways. In her novel *Housekeeping*, Robinson's use of descriptive language manages to pull the reader *away* from the experiences of the characters, leaving the reader feeling very disconnected and detached with the characters in the book. In Hogan's *Solar Storms*, descriptions and style are used to connect the reader with the characters of the book, letting the reader actually *feel* the loss and loneliness of the characters.

Early in *Housekeeping*, the narrator's mother and sisters, as well as her grandmother, lose their father in a train accident. A disaster that should be horrific and devastating is treated almost as though it is an everyday experience. The grandfather worked for the train company:

He held this post for two years, when, as he was returning from some business in Spokane, his mortal and professional careers ended in a spectacular derailment...The train, which was black and sleek and elegant, and was called the Fireball, had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed

over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock. (Robinson 5-6)

Robinson's choice of words from this passage helps take the reader away from the situation and observe it as though the accident is nothing out of the ordinary. 'Spectacular' puts one in mind of something thrilling or exciting, and the sentence in which she uses it makes it seem almost as though the grandfather was simply fired from his job instead of killed in an accident. The fact that he died is almost more of an afterthought. There is also her description of the train sliding off a rock 'like a weasel'; almost as though the accident were something a playful animal might do for fun.

A little later in the book, the narrator's mother commits suicide, and again it is treated as though the act were an everyday, normal occurrence. The narrator, Ruthie, her sister Lucille and their mother left on a trip to go visit their grandmother:

It proved to be a fateful journey. Helen took us through the mountains and across the desert and into the mountains again, and at last to the lake and over the bridge into town, left at the light onto Sycamore Street and straight for six blocks. She put our suitcases in the screened porch, which was populated by a cat and a matronly washing machine, and told us to wait quietly. Then she went back to the car and drove north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in Bernice's Ford from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake. (Robinson 22)

In this passage, it is Robinson's extreme attention to detail that disconnects the reader from feeling any sadness that two little girls have just been abandoned by their mother. Her use of the exact directions of the trip, down to street names, distances, and even the name of the cliff

the mother drove her car off of bring the reader to almost think of the suicide as a mere road trip. The girls are left with a 'matronly washing machine' as a replacement for their mother, as though they will be okay left alone, because they have a machine and a cat to guard them. Missing from the text is any feeling from the characters. Ruthie narrates her mother's death as though it happened to someone else, and expresses neither remorse nor anger that she and her sister were simply dropped off at their grandma's so that their mother could die.

Near the end of the novel, Ruthie is going to be taken away from her aunt Sylvie, whom the county believes is not acting as a good guardian for either of the girls. Even this loss, a tearing apart of family, does not draw the reader in emotionally:

Sylvie did not want to lose me. She did not want me to grow gigantic and multiple, so that I seemed to fill the whole house, and she did not wish me to turn subtle and miscible, so that I could pass through the membranes that separate dream and dream. She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion—a familiar shape, a familiar face, a familiar silence. (Robinson 195)

Robinson's dreamy style of this passage makes it hard to connect feeling to Ruthie's thoughts. The long sentences, broken only by occasional commas make it hard to focus on what effect the loss of Ruthie would have on Sylvie. Sylvie as a character is too dreamlike and in her own world to even really recognize Ruthie's current presence with 'strong emotion', therefore she would likely barely feel Ruthie's absence if she was taken away.

Contrasting the disconnected style of Robinson's novel, Hogan's *Solar Storms* literally draws the reader in, feeling with genuine emotion the losses and loneliness of the novel's Native

Americans. Angel, the novel's main protagonist woman, discovers that white men are building dams in their native land and destroying the earth as they build. Angel describes how she feels when she realizes her entire world is changing because the beaver population is dwindling:

I understood. I did. I understood in one word: the beavers were nearly gone, our lives nearly extinguished along with theirs, our world transformed by those who could never have dreamed this continent in all its mystery, in all its life and beauty. It would never recover itself. (Hogan 130)

Here, Hogan's choices of words actually convey a sense of loss to the reader. Angel's life is being 'extinguished', a word that the reader can relate to as something being put out or destroyed, never to be seen again. Hogan's choice of short, choppy sentences, 'it would never recover itself' and 'I did', mixed in with a longer, more descriptive sentence help to bring out the actual loss by letting the reader focus more on the beauty and life that will be missing if Angel's native land is destroyed.

Once Angel has returned to the land of the Fat Eaters, where her mother is from, the white men have come in full force and begun to destroy the land, moving the course of rivers, killing animals, and bringing in electricity to people who have neither want nor need for it. The change makes Angel lonely:

Later, I thought back to Tulik's words about loneliness. By then, I knew what loneliness was...It was the enormous river now gone. It was drowned willows and alders. It was the three dead lynx caught in a reservoir, ten thousand drowned caribou. It was the river traveling out of its raging, swift power and life into such humdrum places as kitchens with stoves and refrigerators. (Hogan 268)

From the passage the reader can feel how genuinely sad Angel is about the loss of her world. The descriptions down to the numbers of dead lynx and caribou show she has paid attention to even the smallest of losses, and draws the reader in with her own sadness. The passage is vivid enough that the reader can picture the animals dying, the landscape void of trees and even imagine what it would be like to have a river pushing into their kitchen, instead of in its place in nature.

In her novel, Hogan creates a world where even the simplest act can be felt emotionally by the reader. Tulik, the head male in Angel's homeland, has his house burnt down by the white men because of protests the Indian's made against the dam building. Hogan's description of his loss really connects the reader with Tulik's loss:

And then, not knowing what else to do, I sat on a rock and watched Tulik rake and sweep the wolverine prints away. He worked as if he believed he could sweep trouble off our backs. He didn't notice that he'd burned the soles off his shoes and that his feet were blistered in places. (Hogan 320)

This excerpt directly connects the reader with the intensity of Tulik's loss by describing his burnt feet. Hogan's use of Tulik wanting sweep away trouble so strongly that he did not even notice pain is a very effective strategy to help the reader feel Tulik's own feelings.

Both Hogan and Robinson use descriptive language to illustrate loss and loneliness in their novels. Robinson's descriptions in *Housekeeping* are written in a way that makes connecting with the characters very difficult, leaving the novel open for interpretation as a text where style is the main focus. In *Solar Storms*, Hogan's use of language really draws the reader in with the story to allow for a stronger emotional impact of the loss of Native American culture,

with the main purpose of the novel as societal action against injustice. In both cases, the authors are very effective in using their own unique styles to bring their main points across.