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Analytical View of Symbolism in “Refuge”

Change has a tendency to come suddenly and all at once. In Terry Tempest Williams’, “Refuge”, the concept of change is explored as she experiences the implications of the rising Great Salt Lake, her mother’s battle with cancer, and her journey of self discovery. Growing up, Williams became acquainted with constants. Her mother would prepare Christmas brunch, her grandmother would take her to see the birds at the Bear River Refuge, and the Great Salt Lake would be grimy and leave her hair encrusted with salt crystals. However, Williams learns that these constants are not as concrete as she had come to believe, prompting her to grow, adapt, and learn. Through the use of symbolism in Terry Tempest Williams’, “Refuge”, three story lines are developed, portraying their own individual narrative and struggle, connecting with one another through the common motif of change.

Throughout the entirety of Utah’s civilized history, the Great Salt Lake has not given its surrounding inhabitants the courtesy of stability. The body of water does not pay mind to convenience, construction, or life - as it is itself its own entity, it cannot be controlled or subverted. Williams writes, “I want to see the lake as Woman, as myself, in her refusal to be tamed,” (Williams 92). Connecting the spontaneity of the water to her inner being, Williams demonstrates the connection between her own growth and that which she can learn from a

constant in her life. She continues to write, “I recognize her as a wilderness, raw and self-defined,” (Williams 92). The use of ‘raw’ and ‘self-defined’ add commentary on both the Great Salt Lake and her recognition of individuality. Confined by none and completely whole, Williams accredits the lake for the apartness of its existence; it does not answer to any one entity and it has always been utterly unconfined. As the Great Salt Lake begins to rise, not only the citizens of Salt Lake City are affected, but another constant in Williams’ life - the Bear River Bird Refuge. Being a spectator of the native birds her whole life, as the water rises and floods the marshlands which is home to these creatures, Williams is taken aback when suddenly, their bounty and beauty is no longer present. She explains, “The balance between colony-resting birds, the fluctuating Great Salt Lake, and its wetlands is a delicate one,” (Williams 72). Balance is the key word utilized and can be applicable to not only the settling of the birds, but also the concentration in her own life. As the birds leave the lake and its surroundings, the harmony which Williams had placed in the comfort of the familiar ceases in its prominence. The water is beginning to flood one of the main constants which Williams possessed, and consequently, leading to the introduction of the unfamiliar. Without the birds and their assured presence, Williams is faced with the concept of allowing and putting faith in change.

The Great Salt Lake continues to rise and alter the norm of Salt Lake City, meanwhile Williams is confronted with another diversity - her mother’s imminent death. Being a large constant in Williams’ life, the diagnosis comes as a blow. Not only is Williams going to lose her mother, her support, but also the familiar sense of tradition. However, Williams recognizes that this battle is not hers, she is not the one experiencing death. She writes, “I have refused to believe that mother will die. And by denying her death, I deny her life. Denial stops us from

listening. I cannot hear what mother is saying. I can only hear what I want,” (Williams 75-76).

The aftermath of change is often denial and Williams recognizes that the path of ignorance is not beneficial but rather prolongs pain. As Williams’ mother becomes increasingly ill, the struggle of balance asserts itself into her daily life. The balance of accepting her death and the balance of accepting her wishes weigh harder on Williams as she is attempting to allow herself to begin the grieving process while also respecting her mother’s wish to live in the moment, not in anticipation of the future. Mother is still alive, she is still present, and she is not her disease.

Williams begins experiencing stepping into her role in life, as she is trying to preserve tradition while also accepting that refuge is found in change. She writes, “A person with cancer dies in increments, and a part of you slowly dies with them,” (Williams 173). In the relationship which Williams and her mother share, the intimacy of moments is their anchor. Williams is surrendering her weight which is tied down to the familiar, and with guidance from her mother, allowingg the change of acceptance. She is letting the reliance of solidity die and birthing faith in the moment.

The water is rising, the water is retreating, mother is dying, and Williams is becoming whole. During the process of learning the beauty of acceptance, Williams embarks on a journey of self discovery, finding peace in the unknown. In the beginning of the novel, the struggle of anticipating results plagues Williams as she is uncomfortable with the changes presented. She writes, “It is a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination fuse,” (Williams 21). The Bear River Bird refuge and familial traditions have become rooted into her life, she is reliant on their predictability and what they offer. As changes occur, Williams is confronted with her own outlook transforming, writing, “It’s strange to feel

change coming. It's easy to ignore [...] We go about our business with the usual alacrity, while in the pit of our stomach there is a sense of something tenacious," (Williams 24). As the Great Salt Lake continues to frivolously rise, Williams recognizes that change is inevitable. The water will submerge her childhood playing fields, the memories will be temporarily without a tangent home, and the recognition that this is life in its most natural of forms is the acceptance of the inescapable. As Williams becomes acquainted with the concept of embracing the becoming, her outlook transforms and she writes, "I feel like a potter trying to shape my life with the materials at hand. But my creation is internal. My vessel is my body, where I hold a space of healing for those I love," (Williams, 168). Williams is more comfortable not only with external conditions, but also herself as an individual. She has placed her value both in herself and others as she recognizes the importance of self growth and reflection, and accepting the environment which she resides in.

Throughout the entirety of "Refuge" by Terry Tempest Williams, the motif of change is explored through the rising levels of the Great Salt Lake, her mother's battle with cancer and the corresponding process of self discovery. As Williams is facing these alterations to what she has always known to be constant, she comes to learn the beauty of the unknown and the appreciation of each day. She sees the departure of the birds from the refuge as an opportunity for them to return once again to their familiar. She embraces her mother's death as an individual struggle. "How do you find refuge in change?" (Williams 119). Welcoming the unforeseen.