

To hear that mournful  
melody



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In his book *Winter's Bone*, Daniel Woodrell follows sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly in her struggle to help her family survive in the bleak Ozarks. The protagonist must constantly maintain a crucial balance between caring for her mentally incapacitated mother and younger siblings while hunting the hardscrabble hills surrounding her dilapidated home for her jailbird father who used their house to guarantee his bail bond. Since the idea of the strength of family bonds is central to the text, the passage in which Ree prepares her brothers for school is key to the novel as it establishes her as the mother figure to the boys. In this passage, Woodrell uses indirect characterization, shown through the lens of Ree's thoughts and actions, to both magnify the predominant idea of the duties of the archetypal mother and underscore that those who choose to take on the role of mother are responsible not only for providing the basics of survival for their children, but also for their mental and emotional well-being. Director Debra Granik carefully selects a poignant song to accompany Ree's interactions with her siblings in the movie's opening scene, a device that effectively translates Woodrell's idea of maternal love and responsibility from the page to the screen.

Woodrell uses indirect characterization in this passage, immersing the reader in Ree's consciousness to establish that Ree is much more than an older sibling to her brothers and is in fact the archetypal mother. Before the boys go to school, she feeds them and ensures that they are ready to ride the bus. Ree instructs them to "' finish up eatin'" (6) and "' put those ... socks on'" (7), cajoling them as mothers have through the ages. As she performs these quintessential duties, her birth mother silently rocks in a chair near the

potbelly stove like a “ breathing thing that sat near heat and occasionally made a sound” (6). The juxtaposition between Ree’s homely actions and the mother’s stillness and inability to fulfill even the slightest maternal responsibilities shows how Ree has readily assumed the role as the mother of the boys. In this passage, Ree provides for the physical needs of the children by feeding them breakfast, while at the same time providing for their intellectual needs by making sure they’re ready for school, obligations normally fulfilled by a biological mother but ones that Ree has readily assumed without complaint. Woodrell uses indirect characterization to further emphasize Ree’s maternal role by showing the reader her careful observations of the boys’ characters, comparing them to “ scampering quotation marks” (7), as well as her desire that they “ not be dead to wonder by age twelve” (8). Ree’s careful studies of her brothers are more akin to a mother’s conscious reflections of her children than a sister’s considerations of her siblings, which is additional proof that Ree has taken on the role of the parent. Additionally, by hoping that they not become dead to wonder, Ree demonstrates that she wants to protect the emotions and innocence of her brothers, another example of her nurturing and protective maternal instincts.

Throughout history, mothers who not only perform caretaking duties but also support their children have been considered good mothers. Woodrell suggests that Ree is a quintessentially good mother because she provides physical, intellectual and emotional care for her children in a willing and loving way. Granik’s opening scenes and music choice highlight Ree’s role as a parent, successfully translating Woodrell’s indirect characterization of Ree as an archetypal mother. The movie begins with a simple shot of the

mountains, then transitions into a scene of Ree's two siblings, Ashley and Sonny, bouncing on a trampoline. The smiles of the children show them to be simply happy and seemingly unperturbed by life in a ramshackle house. The scene then moves to the children playing with a box of puppies and finally to Sonny pulling Ashley along on a skateboard, visual manifestations of Ree's observation of them as "scampering quotation marks". After these scenes, a laughing Ashley tries to help Ree hang up clothes to dry while Sonny swings in a hammock, carefree actions that show that the children feel safe with Ree, who has assumed the mother's role, caring for their well-being by performing typical maternal jobs. In the next shot, Ree sits next to Ashley and dresses Ashley's doll, a scene that shows their close bond, another archetypal example of a mother and daughter sharing a special moment. All of these scenes of happy family togetherness are underscored by the accompanying song, "Missouri Waltz." The lyrics of this song are not only an intimate lullaby a mother once sang to her child, but also a nostalgic expression for a time when the singer was a child "on my mommy's knee ... [hearing] that mournful melody" and the "old folks were hummin'; their banjos a strummin,'" (CITE); a time when a multigenerational family was united in melodic harmony, a contrast to the Dolly family. This mournful haunting melody expresses both the intimate maternal connection between Ree and her siblings as well as the sadness underlying the absence of their biological mother and father for whom Ree stands as willing, loving substitute. Though Granik has chosen to remove all dialogue from the opening scenes, she is able to convey Woodrell's overarching theme of motherhood to the big screen through careful choice of images and music.

In the absence of her mother and father, Ree must act as a pillar of physical and emotional support for her siblings, becoming the archetypal mother. In the novel, Woodrell contrasts Ree's maternal role with that of her mentally absent mother, stressing Ree's importance in maintaining the family. Granik effectively incorporates this idea into the movie through the song lyrics and the scenes she chooses to portray Ree as a kind and caring mother.

Ultimately, both accomplish the same portrayal of Ree, albeit in different ways.