The consequences of loneliness: short fiction by carver and hood

Raymond Carver's " A Small, Good Thing" follows the story of a family that tragically loses their son in a car accident. After the son's death the parents continually receive phone calls from the baker of their son's birthday cake, enraging the grieving parents. Mary Hood's " How Far She Went" portrays a young and rebellious girl fighting to escape the confines of her grandmother's oppressive rule. When the girl takes her rebellion too far and gets into trouble, her grandmother comes to her rescue, in turn strengthening their frail relationship. In both Raymond Carver's " A Small, Good Thing" and Mary Hood's " How Far She Went", the narratives' conclusions have a cathartic effect through the use of finely-coordinated literary techniques.

Varying forms of diction are employed in both of the texts as a means to mark a sudden change in the narrative. In " A Small, Good Thing", Carver utilizes abstract diction. The baker specifically shows immense regret and asks the parents to " Forgive me, if you can." (Carver, 9). His diction denotes his emotional distress concerning the death of Scotty and his unfortunate part in the parent's anguish. This is emphasized when he pleads Scotty's parents to forgive him and see that he is "…not an evil man…" (Carver, 9). This is the first time that the baker has realized the consequences of his actions and has apologized to Scotty's parents. The abstract diction highlights this shift from the baker being angry at the parents, to empathizing with their pain. While the baker can not know the depth of their pain, being childless, he has such deep reserves of sadness that, when they arrive in such a vulnerable state, he is compelled to open up himself. Scotty's parents listen and appreciate what the baker has to say. The

abstract diction illustrates the resolution of the conflict between the baker and Scotty's parents and the two parties sympathizing with the others pain.

In " How Far She Went", Hood utilizes concrete diction in order to stimulate a sensory response. The concrete diction portrays the events in a very factual manner. Unlike the girl's usual responses, she comes out and says " I'm sorry…" (Hood, 15), to her granny for the first time in the text. This straightforward diction provides a sense of clarity. The relationship between granny and the girl is known to be constantly filled with anger and disagreement. However, granny too, is shown to have turned a corner as she finally puts her granddaughter's needs before her dog's and tells the girl, " It was him or you…" (Hood, 16). The shift to concrete diction illustrates that the two are finally communicating with one another and suggests an end to their toxic relationship. While both authors employ different types of diction, they both mark the end of a conflict and the beginnings of a healthy relationship.

Symbolism is also prominent in both of the texts. In " A Small, Good Thing", the title itself is symbolic and comes into play in the passage as well. The title is seen in the passage when the baker is trying to reconcile with Scotty's parents and offers them comfort in the form of food. The baker says that eating is "…a small, good thing…" (Carver, 19), in their time of distress. Nothing drives home the tenderness of attempted connection more strongly than their final scene with the baker. The baker has revealed the depth of his suffering, so that for the first time, Scotty's parents can begin to process the depth of their own suffering. These people are not the same and they can only approach each other so much, and yet because they try to connect,

they are all profoundly affected. Carver's suggestion is that we are all connected in our smallness, in our lack of control. And while it might be impossible for us to ever truly know one another, or ever take full control of our lives, our attempts to be kind and understand other people is "…a small, good thing…." (Carver 19), that makes our lives worthwhile.

In " How Far She Went", symbolism takes place in the form of personification. The girl is said to have been, "…shedding water like a garment." (Hood, 9-10). This takes place after discovering her grandmother's unlimited love for her. Like the baptism of a christian symbolizing their acceptance of Jesus Christ she rises from the water a new person, shedding her old sins and more shallow self for a new more mature person that is able to sympathize with her granny and look beyond her stubborn outer shell. This in turn assists her in mending her relationship with granny.

In " A Small, Good Thing", Carver employs characterization to highlight the benefits of sympathizing with another person in order to settle an argument. The baker begins to characterize himself, and opens up to Scotty's parents about his own struggles and insecurities as a way to relate to them in their time of need. Both Scotty's parents and the baker sense that this occasion is sacred in that they can connect with one another through a shared understanding of pain and disappointment. He refers to himself as "…just a baker…" (Carver, 2), saying that he "…doesn't know how to act anymore…" (Carver, 10-11). Scotty's parents relate to the baker's struggles of not having any children as they too are newly childless. They find particular comfort when the baker began to speak of loneliness, as they too feel this common loneliness now that their only child has died. The commonalities of the baker

and Scotty's parents emphasized by the various interactions, explore the relationship between helplessness and uncertainty. When put into situations where they lack control, each of the characters falls prey to the overwhelming fear and isolation. Throughout the story, the characters reconcile their difference, resulting in the creation of new hope in learning from the unknown and the alleviation of their previous helplessness.

Characterization is also utilized by Hood in " How Far She Went". Granny is characterized as being a strong and independent figure. She emphasizes her own independence by saying that where they are from, "…we beat our own burdens." (Hood, 23-24), illustrating to her granddaughter that she must be able to rely on herself to solve her own problems. She is also further characterized as being very self-reliant when described as having "…country grace…" (Hood, 27). Up until this point in the text, granny had been characterized as cruel and having difficulty emotionally investing in others due to her past hardships. This passage marks a shift in the way that granny is characterized. From a negative point of view, granny is now portrayed as being a powerful and self-determining woman. This suggest that although a person may seem insensitive and forsaken, this may simply be a persona, not necessarily an accurate depiction of who the person truly is.

Although the two texts prominently utilize varying literary techniques, they both create a similar effect. Carver and Hood alike create a commentary that criticizes the act of judging another person when one is not fully aware of their personal conflicts. In both " A Small, Good Thing" and " How Far She Went", the conclusions of the texts are imperative to understanding the author's overall commentary. All of the major characters begin to more fully

relate to their adversary, and begin to sympathize with their individual struggles. The literary techniques employed highlight that we are all separate from one another and yet still endeavor to connect in our loneliness. We are all alone, and yet we persevere in hope of making a connection with others. The conclusions create a cathartic effect as all members of the parties are able to set aside their past, and begin to create a healthier relationship with one another.