

The ironies of grief essay example

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“ Saint Helene” by Alice Hoffman is a fascinating, moving and sad story. Through a variety of literary techniques such as characterisation, viewpoint and language, Hoffman shows us the effects that tragedy can have on a person and on the people around them. More importantly, however, is the way in which the author has explored the unpredictable nature of grief and of how people handle it in different ways.

“ Saint Helene” is written in third person narrative and the view point switches several times throughout the story. This is fairly unusual in a short story as authors tend to stick to the point of view of one character throughout in order to avoid confusion. However, Hoffman changes view point regularly in a way that is not puzzling to the reader. The use of third person in this story works well in keeping the reader at a distance from the characters. The majority of the story centres around Shelby. Since the accident, Shelby has lived a life mostly in solitude and has persistently kept everyone at a distance. Hoffman’s choice of narrative echoes this aloofness in Shelby and, therefore, writing the story in first person would have been inappropriate and less effective. Furthermore, the author’s decision to switch viewpoints throughout the story was a good one. Again, this emphasises the distance that Shelby has created between herself and others around her, as readers are never with her for too long at a time.

For the most part, the narrative voice is fairly objective. It speaks of the facts, such as reporting the events of each anniversary of Helene’s accident: “ The light globes are made at the high school, Middleborough High, where Helene went until her junior year” (Hoffman). However, as the viewpoint becomes more focussed in any given passage, the voice changes to a more

intimate language style, for example, “ Shelby made a sound she hadn’t expected to be a sob” (Hoffman). The reader is given a good insight into Shelby’s life while still retaining the desired amount of distance. Although the viewpoints of other characters are dipped into, the reader doesn’t get an insight into their lives in the same way as they do Shelby’s.

Hoffman’s use of character is the overarching strength of this story. Readers are introduced to Shelby who, since the accident where Helene was so badly hurt, has lived in her parents’ basement and has been smoking a large amount weed to help her through life. Hoffman lets the reader know that Shelby’s parents are allowing her to live like this through the dialogue between them. However, dialogue is the only insight we get into the relationships between Shelby and each of her parents. This is intelligently executed by Hoffman as, though conversation alone, we learn that Shelby’s relationship with her father is not strong, for example, when sitting on the sofa together and Shelby makes a comment about him making her vomit, he says, “ I wouldn’t want to do that. You’d have to be alive to do that” (Hoffman). Few words are exchanged between Shelby and her father. In contrast, her mother appears to be making an effort to speak to Shelby and will try to interact with her, for example when she enters the basement or when she approaches her in the yard.

For the majority of the story, the dialogue is sparse. Hoffman has used this literary technique to show how infrequently Shelby speaks to anyone, even her family. However, in the last section of the story, this changes. Shelby and Ben meet up and decide to visit Helene’s house and, from this point, the

story is mostly comprised of dialogue between Shelby and Ben. This is the first time that the reader sees a prolonged conversation between Shelby and another person and demonstrates how close the two people are, compared with Shelby's relationship with others.

Throughout the story, Helene remains enigmatic which provides an ironic contrast to the choice of title. Presumably, Hoffman chose to title the piece "Saint Helene" to reflect the belief that many of the people in the story have that visiting Helene in her bedroom can cure people of illnesses and grant miracles. However, there is a deeper level to the title. Although large as life in the title, the readers gain very little insight to Helene in the story, and are never taken to meet her. Since Helene's accident, people have been marking its anniversary almost religiously. At the end of the story we believe that Ben has been looking through the window at Helene and he reports back to Shelby what he has seen. However, in the concluding paragraph we learn that, in fact, even he didn't really look at her: "But not so stupid that he'd actually opened his eyes when he leaned toward Helene's window. Some things were best remembered the way you wanted to remember them, like this road, these stars, this girl beside him walking into the centre of the cold night, looking straight ahead" (Hoffman). This ending ensured that Helene remained enigmatic and saint like, right up until the end.

The use of ending as cited above provides a subtle interesting twist to the tale. Leading up to it we learn that Ben is going away to study pharmaceuticals which, as Shelby points out to him, is ironic as he is currently a drug dealer. The bigger irony, however, lies in the ending that

seems both optimistic and pessimistic. On the one hand, the ending is beautiful and the two of them walking down the road together suggests a certain amount of hope for the future. Conversely, however, Shelby is “walking into the centre of the cold night” (Hoffman) which suggests there are further dark times to come for her, especially as she is looking straight ahead into it. This ending works effectively as it displays the unpredictable nature of Shelby’s future. Ben is planning on attending college and building a career for himself, which shows that people can change their lives for the better, sometimes in huge ways. Yet, Shelby is on a path of self-destruction and it is impossible for readers, or Shelby herself, to know what is likely to happen to her in the long-term.

“ Saint Helene” is a touching story containing strong and memorable characters. The effects of grief can be vast and diverse, as well as far reaching. Hoffman captures and relates this concept well to her readers. Furthermore, this story shows how unpredictable grief can be and the way in which it can change people’s perceptions, and even personalities.