Only Because of My Roots and Wings

You’re feeling a little under the weather, it’s not the flu, it’s not the measles, and it’s not mononucleosis. It’s not the kind of sickness that a doctor can prescribe medication or one that rest and a lot of vitamin C can cure. It’s the kind of sickness that you only get on certain occasions; this common illness is called home sickness. There is a reason that so many people experience this common illness, it’s that they have been given the ability to spread their wings and venture away from their home to experience the outside world; yet they still have the solid roots that keep them attached to the place in which they can call home. In Salman Rushdie’s piece “Out of Kansas” this idea is presented. We all need to have the roots of a good childhood home and the ability to leave it and experience the world outside our home; where we can spread our wings. This idea is also presented in Anne Sexton’s pieces “Red Riding Hood” and “Sleeping Beauty, Gordimer’s short story “Once Upon A Time,” and Marquez’s short story “The Handsomest Drowned Man Alive.”

In the piece “Out of Kansas,” Rushdie proves the popular quote “there is no place like home” faulty, to explain this point. He explains that many leave their childhood places, the homes in which they grew up, equipped with what they have and have become, to finally understand that it’s not that there is no place like home, but that “there is no longer any such place as home” (30 Rushdie). When Dorothy was a part of OZ, she got to spread her wings and experience a place she never even imagined, one in color and excitement. However; even though this land was a place that she found new things she never even could have begun to fathom, Dorothy still returns to her home in Kansas to her family by her bedside surrounding her with love; proving her family roots made it possible for her to spread her wings.

We can learn from Rushdie’s idea of roots and wings that in order to have roots, you must have a strong base at home; a memorable, loving, and comfortable household. And you must have the ability to venture out into the world and experience other things to truly miss home. In Anne Sexton’s poem “Red Riding Hood,” we find a prime example of roots and wings. The young girl, Red Riding Hood, is first mentioned having a loving grandmother who made her a red cape in which Red Riding Hood got her name and which she was never without; “But more than she loved her riding hood she loved her grandmother who lived far from the city in the big wood” (270 Sexton). This is the first time we see the strong roots being mentioned, a loving family member is one of the most important parts of building a strong rooted home.

Then further into the story we find the young girl’s mother allowing Red Riding Hood to spread her wings, “This one day her mother gave her a basket of wine and cake to take to her grandmother because she was ill” (270 Sexton). Red Riding Hood’s mother knows that her daughter must venture far from the city and through the big wood to visit the grandmother; yet she is still allowing her child to spread her wings and venture away from the loving home knowing the dangers that are out there. Along the way we find a wolf that is plotting against Red Riding Hood and planning on killing her and her grandmother. However, even during the terrifying parts of her journey, Sexton uses very fascinating word choice for the description of the wolf encountering Red Riding Hood:

“There among the roots and trunks

With the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss

He planned how to eat them both,

The grandmother an old carrot

And the child a shy budkin

In a red red hood

He bade her to look at the bloodroot,

The small bunchberry and the dogtooth

And pick some for her grandmother

And this she did” (271 Sexton).

Sexton’s description of plant life and several uses of the word “root” are very significant to the story. While venturing away from home, the concept of roots is present during Red Riding Hood’s entire journey. The fact that the wolf made her look at the “bloodroot” and pick some for her grandmother can represent the blood relationship between her and her grandmother and the root is the childhood roots she has from her grandmother.

Then after the wolf eats the grandmother and child, the hunter finds the wolf and cuts him open to try and revive the two. “It was a carnal knife that let Red Riding Hood out like a poppy…”(p272 Sexton). The image of Red Riding Hood and the poppy is very powerful because a poppy is a flower in which have blooming red petals. This goes hand in hand because a poppy is red in color, just as Red Riding Hood’s cape in which her grandma made for her. Also, through Red Riding Hood’s adventure she still had her roots, like that of a flower, holding her to her home and loved ones. Then in the end she has survived by spreading her wings like the petals of the poppy.

Sexton uses “Red Riding Hood” to show that strong family roots and the ability to spread ones wings, will cause a more positive outlook on life. However, she uses the poem “Sleeping Beauty” to show how the opposite effect can take place. In the preface of the poem we find trouble with childhood roots right off the bat:

“Little doll child,

Come here to papa.

Sit on my knee.

I have kisses for the back of your neck.

A penny for your thoughts, Princess.

I will hunt them like an emerald.

Come be my snooky

And I will give you a root.

That kind of voyage

Rank as honeysuckle” (291 Sexton).

The description of a young girl’s childhood in this passage is very troubling. It is of a father who wants to give his “root” to his daughter, meaning having sexual intercourse with her. When Sexton says that this voyage is as rank as honeysuckle, it is very significant to the theme of root and wings. Already from the start we find this child is not going to have strong childhood roots, which will cause the voyage where she may be able to spread her wings, to be as rank as honeysuckle. Further into the story it is explained how the young girl is taken away from her home and is put into prison; and finally is released and returns to her place where she is raised. However unlike Red Riding Hood, her home is not that of comfort and care:

“Daddy?

That’s another kind of prison.

It’s not the prince at all,

But my father

Drunkenly bent over my bed,

Circling the abyss like a shark,

My father thick upon me

Like some sleeping jellyfish

What voyage is this, little girl?

This coming out of prison?

God help-

This life after death?” (295 Sexton)

Sleeping beauty returns from prison to the place in which she grew up. For most, this should be a wonderful joyous occasion. However, because of her dreadful childhood with her father, with just as bad of a present, her life is still a prison. Sexton asks “what voyage is this” which is proving that the young girl did not get to spread her wings and make the life away from home she wanted, her voyage is solely based on her troubled father causing her present to be like life after death. Her troubled roots have caused her to have broken wings.

Similar to Sexton, in Gordimer’s story “Once Upon A Time” we find one piece of the equation of roots and wings missed, which causes a household to become a prison. At the beginning of the story we find the Happily Ever After family slowly transforming their home into a prison. They place walls around their property, set up gates, burglar bars, put in alarms, and finally place a razor-toothed coiled fence around the top of the walls. However as crazy as it may seem, the family had a purpose for putting up these extreme ways of protection:

“In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and where living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much” (126 Gordimer).

From the start of the story we find that the family has very strong family roots. They love each other and are willing to go to the extreme to protect one another. However, as the story moves on we begin to find a missing piece of the equation, wings. As each new piece of the house is concealed in, so is the life of the young boy. He is being trapped by his loved ones from experiencing the outside world. Sexton explains in the preface the idea of an apartheid, a strict system of racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa against black south Africans, and how the Happily Ever After family is demonstrating similar actions. “There were riots, but these were outside the city, where people of another color were quartered. These people are not allowed into the suburb except as reliable house maids or gardeners” (127 Gordimer). The boy’s grandmother also explains to the family that they cannot take anyone off of the street. This is a horrible situation because for one to experience the outside world you need to be open to it or one will come to experience complete demise. And that is exactly what happens to the Happily Ever After family with the young boy, “He dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his body to creep in, and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into his tangle” (128 Gordimer). The family tried to keep the outside world from hurting their family; ironically, keeping him safe from the outside world is what killed him. They grounded the boy with strong roots but then stripped him of his wings.

In addition to Gordimer, Marquez’s short story “The Handsomest Drowned Man Alive” we find another example of how important roots and wings are to a whole community of people. At the beginning of the story we are introduced into a village that is very closed minded, one that does not contain strong roots or wings:

“The village was made up of only twenty-odd wooden houses that has stone courtyards with no flower and which were spread about on the end of a desert like cape. There was so little land that mother always went about with the feat that the wind would carry off their children and the few dead that the years had cause among them had to be thrown off of cliffs” (1212 Marquez).

The whole village is very bare and the mothers have to worry about their children going off alone because they feared they would be thrown off the cliffs, clearly the children cannot spread their wings. However, the turning point in the story comes very early on when a drowned man is washed onto shore. The whole town becomes fascinated by this man. He was very oversized and was too large for their doors and homes. After taking care of this man the village realizes some things about their own village, “While they fought for the privilege of carrying him on their shoulders along the steep escarpment by the cliffs, men and women became aware for the first time of the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards, the narrowness of their dreams as they faced the splendor and beauty of their downed man” (1214 Marquez). Unlike the Happily Ever After family, the people of this village have become open to the outside world. They soon begin to make changes to their entire village and lives that create roots and wings. They gave their houses wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors. They painted their houses gay colors. And most importantly they were going to plant flowers on the cliffs. They also were going to be open to any outsiders that were to come upon their village:

“In the future years at dawn the passengers on great liners would awaken, sufficed by the smell of gardens on the high seas, and the captain would have to come down from the bridge in his dress uniform, with his astrolabe, and his row of war medals and, pointing to the promontory of roses on the horizon, he would say in fourteen languages, look there, where the wind is so peaceful now that it’s gone to sleep beneath the beds, over there, where the sun’s so bright that the sunflowers don’t know which way to turn…”(1215 Marquez).

Just like in Sexton’s story of “Red Riding Hood,” the flowers being planted in this story represent roots and wings; the roots of the flowers being planted create a strong new home, and the petals of the flowers open just as the ideas, hearts, and minds of the villagers.

There are many ways one can define the word home. But the true way to understand the meaning of home is to have both roots and wings. Through the ideas of Rushdie, Sexton, Gordimer, and Marquez, we find that strong family roots and the ability to spread your wings to being open and ready to experience the outside world is the best way to live. My family has been such an amazing impact and inspiration in my life and I know I always have some place to return to where I will feel unconditionally loved and cared for. And they have let me go off to college with the faith and fear of me living away from home and experiencing new people and new things. I truly can say that something is still holding me strong and lifting me up, a part of me stays grounded so the rest of me can fly. But only because I can say, I have my roots and wings.

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