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Essay

Discovering Meaning Through Structure

In some cases, structure is everything. Architects, engineers, and carpenters would certainly agree. But even authors recognize the importance of structure, and use it as a tool to create meaning in literature. Emma Donoghue, in her novel, *Room*, expertly uses structure to help her readers begin to understand the incomprehensible concepts of rape and kidnapping through the fictional story of a five-year-old boy, Jack, who has spent his entire life imprisoned in one room with his mother. The idea of meaning being created through structure is called “structuralism”. By examining the novel using structuralist theory, both the message of the novel and techniques used by the author to portray it, can be better understood.

Structuralists believe that “the human mind functions by recognizing or, if none are available, imposing structures” (Briggs and Meyer). These structures give meaning to life and are often found within the culture in which a person lives. In other words, “culture, like language, is composed of hidden rules that govern the behaviour of its practitioners” (Briggs and Meyer). By adhering to these rules and placing experiences in their context, a person understands his or her role in life and its meaning. What makes a person’s understanding of life different from another, are differences in these systems, but the structural rules themselves are often difficult to articulate because they can be deeply ingrained in a person’s psyche. Structuralists must, therefore, use different tools to identify them.

The first of these tools is the concept of binary oppositions – sets of two contrasting ideas. Hot and cold, light and dark, reasonable and unreasonable are all examples of binary oppositions, and “one can describe fields of cultural thought ... by describing the binary sets which compose them” (Lye). The meaning of the set is not made evident in the contrast between them, however, but “must be understood in terms of their relation to the entire system” (Briggs and Meyer). Another useful structuralist tool is that of signs. A sign on a basic level is “a union of signifier and signified, and is anything that stands for anything else” (Lye). The “signifier” would be the object or concept itself and the “signified” would be what it represents. Once again, the meaning of the sign depends on the system within which it is found.

There are two main systems of understanding in Donoghue’s novel, and by contrasting the two, she helps her readers understand both the terrible situation Jack and Ma have had to endure, as well as Jack’s journey from ignorance to understanding. One is the modern cultural structure of Western society, with which most readers identify, and the other is Jack’s personal belief system and perception of the world. The latter changes drastically throughout the novel, developing more and more similarities with the former. These changes can be divided into four stages: Jack’s understanding of life in the context of Room, his changing belief system once he finds out about the existence of an outside world, his experience in the “Outside” and how the structure of his life changes accordingly, and his final acceptance of the “normal” societal conventions of the Outside. In this way, the changing structure of Jack’s life and the ways in which he responds to it reflect his journey from captivity to freedom, and from ignorance to understanding of his identity within the world.

Jack spends the first five years of his life inside a single-roomed garden shed – known to him as “Room”. Accordingly, both the physical structure of Room and the routine structure of

his life there shape his initial belief system. Jack's queer tendency to describe ordinary objects, "Dresser", "Wardrobe", "Table" using proper nouns, for example, can be explained in the context of Room, as there are only one of each of these objects that exist to him. Similarly, his belief that the only thing outside of Room is "Outer Space" (Donoghue 10), is formulated based on the structure in which Room is the entire world. Since he has never encountered another person apart from Ma and Old Nick, he believes TV characters like Dora and Spongebob, characters from the stories Ma tells him, such as Baby Jesus, and Saint Paul, and objects such as Eggsnake and Jeep to be his real friends. Jack, playing with Toothbrush one day, for example explains, "Toothbrush wants a turn but I tell him sorry, he's too long" (Donoghue 18). He is accustomed to routines like breastfeeding which he calls "having some", explaining, "I... have some a few times in the day and the night" (Donoghue 24). "Sundaytreat" is another routine where Jack and Ma get to ask for one special item each week, for example, "Let's ask for a new book for Sundaytreat" (Donoghue 41).

Structuralists recognize that "the reader constructs literature, that is, reads the text with certain conventions and expectations in mind" (Lye), and Jack's beliefs and routines originating from the structure of his life are so different from these conventions that readers are immediately put on the alert. This is the first step Donoghue takes towards convincing her readers of Jack and Ma's desperate situation, and yet, of Jack's ignorance to it.

The structure of Jack's belief system can also be explained through the binary oppositions that define it. Because Room is all Jack has ever known, and he does not comprehend the possibility of an outside world, he identifies things found within Room as "real" and those things he solely knows about from television as "TV" (not real) to help him understand his world. He explains, for instance, "Spider's real... I've seen her two times" (Donoghue 10),

and “Women aren’t real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either” (Donoghue 23). This structure system also explains Jack’s excitement about seeing a mouse because it becomes for him, “An alive thing, an animal, for really real not TV” (Donoghue 39). It is significant to examine binary oppositions in Jack’s structural belief system as they change throughout Jack’s development, indicating changes in both structure and the beliefs of his life.

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