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First Year Seminar

Final Paper

Sweep and Ideas of the Monstrous in Middle Grade Literature

Despite being a relatively unknown book, *Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster* by Jonathan Auxier has much to offer in the realm of monster theory – especially with its connections to the category of Middle Grade literature. With its target audience of 8–12-year-olds, *Sweep* is a valuable educational tool to help children develop their own understanding of what a monster is. This can be seen in the opposition of the golem, Charlie, who would typically be seen as a “monster” but is quite friendly and caring, and the novel’s main villain, Wilkie Crudd, who is obnoxiously rude and downright hurtful to the kids in his care. The various traits exhibited by Charlie and Crudd in Jonathan Auxier’s *Sweep*, alongside the contrasting ideas that the main character, Nan, holds about monsters, suggest that the definition of a monster relies on one’s own perceptions of reality, and more importantly, on another’s perceived character. Therefore, there is no “true” definition of monster that permeates the novel, allowing the audience to determine their own ideas about if there is a monster in the story at all, and if so, who or what that is.

Monsters have always had a distinct connection to otherness, to the “not-human.” Not only are these definitions seen in contrast to one another, but they also hold an interconnected nature that shifts with our perceptions of what it means to be human or, conversely, what it means to be a monster. Jeffrey Weinstock explains this idea best, when he says that “what is monstrous is always defined by what is human” (Weinstock 358). This is a very interesting lens to connect to *Sweep* because, for the most part, *Sweep* leaves the idea of monstrosity up to the audience. Since

each reader will come into the story with a different perception of what it means to be human, they will each leave with various responses of what it means to be a monster. Weinstock continues by stating “to redefine monstrosity is simultaneously to rethink humanity” (Weinstock 358). Thus, since this book aims to challenge readers’ perceptions of who or what a monster is, *Sweep* also lays the groundwork for readers to change their ideas about what it means to be human. Due to the theme of better understanding one’s self-identity being a large topic of consideration within the middle grade category, it makes sense that the book would address such ideas. In fact, this excerpt from the segment “Middle Grade Literature” by T. Fleischmann in the *Critical Survey of Young Adult Literature* claims that protagonists in MG literature are “just beginning to define their self-identities” (Fleischmann 579). This connects back well to the situation that Nan and Charlie find themselves in within the world of *Sweep*. As they grapple with their own identities and Nan tries to determine what kind of creature Charlie is, they slowly learn more about how they want to define themselves. Each of them develops their own identities over the course of the novel, whether it be Nan discovering who she is without her identity being tied to sweeping chimneys or Charlie learning to read and take care of his own garden. Thus, it is important to consider the educational value that *Sweep* has in helping kids to discover themselves through finding their own definitions of what a monster is.

In fact, the main character, Nan, makes many rather contradictory statements as to what a monster is throughout the novel. At first, when Charlie asks ““What is a monster?”” (Auxier 99), Nan responds with “““Monster” is a word for something that frightens folks. Like a creature of some kind”” (Auxier 99). However, when Charlie then asks ““Am I a monster?”” (Auxier 99), she responds, ““I’ve met monsters before ... And you are not one of them”” (Auxier 99). Here, Nan equates monsters with scariness or danger. When forming her opinion about monsterhood,

she even “thought about Crudd” (Auxier 99) and the “cruel indifference” (Auxier 99) that he had towards her livelihood. If readers think about monsters in this sense, as one in contrast to caring and kindness, then it is clear that Crudd is considered a monster and Charlie is not. Yet this is not the only time that Nan considers what it means to be a monster. Later in the book, she seems to directly contradict her earlier statement, when she tells Charlie ““So what if you are a monster?’ ... ‘I wouldn’t have it any other way’” (Auxier 212). While her assertion of loving Charlie wholeheartedly is quite heartwarming, this is a very different approach to monsterhood than the previous quote. Here, Nan seems to suggest that monster is a word to substitute for creature or, more broadly, a being that is not human. In this case, Charlie would be a monster, whereas Crudd would not. These conflicting ideas about monsterhood are integral to the overall story of *Sweep* and the impact it has on readers. Seeing Nan’s perspective on monsters and this intended double-meaning, readers must go forth and interpret whether Nan is trustworthy and if her definitions are understandable. By the end of the book, readers can determine which definition they think fits best, or if both work simultaneously, or perhaps neither truly works to encapsulate a monster.

Aside from just Nan’s perspective on monsters, another important point from *Invisible Monsters* asserts that “one significant trend in representing the monster has been to decouple physical abnormality from assumptions about intelligence, character, or morals” (Weinstock 359). This has a direct connection to the discussion surrounding Charlie and how his appearance might define him as a monster, but his demeanor does not. Conversely, while Wilkie Crudd’s appearance alone is not enough for him to be considered monstrous, his actions could prove otherwise. In fact, Nan even makes her own claims on the connection between appearance and morality. Originally, she claims, “Folks ought to look the way on the outside that they are on the

inside” (Auxier 211). However, upon further consideration, she retracts her statement and says, “Actually, I think I was wrong to say what I just said. My whole life, folks have treated me like I was nothing—just because of how I looked. And maybe *that’s* the problem. If we all could just ignore the way other people looked, then we could see who they really were” (Auxier 212). Nan’s evolving ideas about this topic correspond to the ways that the audience of *Sweep* might think about appearance and monstrosity. In this way, Nan acts as a sort of vessel for the reader. She contemplates the same ideas that they likely have and continues to develop and elaborate on them in a way that helps readers to understand her thought process and expand on their own ideas. By having a character with similar shifting perceptions, it can be easier for adolescent readers to draw their own conclusions about Charlie and Crudd, alongside their potentially monstrous qualities. Nan’s conclusion that appearance does not impact monstrosity has a clear impact on how readers can further interpret Charlie and Crudd’s characters. No longer connected to looks, Nan and readers can focus on the monstrous in a new way. Additionally, Nan’s statement about seeing people for “who they really [are]” is a convenient segway for readers to think about who they are and who they want to be. They can also examine the way they’ve interacted with other people due to other’s looks and understand that such bias is problematic. Thus, Nan gives a new way for readers to measure humanity – by a person’s acts of kindness.

Monster literature tends to follow a model that Christopher Craft, in his essay *Kiss Me With Those Red Lips*, calls the “triple rhythm” (Craft 107). *Sweep* also follows this pattern that “first invites or admits a monster, then entertains and is entertained by monstrosity for some extended duration, until in its closing pages it expels or repudiates the monster and all the disruption that he/she/it brings” (Craft 107). However, it is interesting to note that this sequence occurs for both Charlie and Wilkie Crudd. Neither character is mentioned from the *very* beginning, where Nan

explains a bit about her background – albeit through flashbacks and dream sequences. However, both characters are soon introduced. Charlie abruptly comes to life during a chimney fire to save Nan’s life. While he is at the forefront for most of the book and could thus be said to be ‘entertaining’ readers with his ‘monstrosity’, he is much easier to empathize with. With all the time that Nan spends with him, Charlie becomes familiar to readers. Eventually, of course, he is ‘expelled’ from the novel as he turns to stone while restoring Nan’s lifeforce. Yet, despite all of this, the same sequence occurs for Crudd. He starts off as a mean, conniving master sweep to Nan and the other children under his command. Then, while he fades into the background, Nan still worries about the possibility of Crudd finding out that she did not die in the chimney fire. Her anxiety about Crudd is very similar to that of other stories where the hero is afraid of the big bad coming to get them. The same cannot be said about Charlie, as Nan only seems to view him positively – though this is not always true for the townsfolk. The only other times Crudd appears in the story, it is to get his revenge on Nan. In fact, he hopes to kill her! The only reason he doesn’t succeed is because Charlie is able to save her. Eventually, Crudd is ‘repudiated’ when he, trying to catch and kill Nan, falls off a building to his own death.

In the end, the reader is left to come to their own conclusions about if either, or even both, of them is the monster. This is almost explained verbatim in *Sweep*, when Miss Bloom gives Nan a copy of *Frankenstein*. After hearing Nan’s confusion about who or what a Frankenstein is, Miss Bloom explains “‘Frankenstein is not the monster. Or perhaps he is. You can tell me after you’ve read it.’” (Auxier 188). This is almost exactly what *Sweep* prompts readers to do – determine if Charlie or Crudd is the true monster of the novel. This string of sentences becomes an example of what readers should do for the book. Though Nan’s thoughts on *Frankenstein* are never

revealed, this wisdom from Miss Bloom is directly applicable to readers of *Sweep* as they work out their own ideas about monsterhood throughout the book.

By leaving the interpretation of monsterhood up to its readers, *Sweep* allows for a greater understanding of oneself. Due to the deep connection between humanity and monstrosity, in which the two are generally seen as opposing forces, while readers learn more about themselves and who they want to be, they simultaneously learn about what qualities they deem monstrous.

Additionally, as they learn what qualities they deem monstrous, they learn who they *do not* want

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Works Cited

Auxier, Jonathan. *Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster*. Amulet Books, 2018.