Nora Dempsey

HUMW-011

12/12/12

Something Mean

In ZZ Packer’s 2003 short story, *Brownies*, the young narrator Laurel discovers the complexities of race relations, and reaches a profound understanding of human nature.  On a trip to Camp Crescendo with her African American Brownie troop, Laurel resolves unanswered questions and internal mysteries. During the outing, racial tensions and fears escalate in a ‘crescendo-like’ manner as the Brownies plot revenge for a perceived slight.  The tension ultimately falls flat when the troop members face their shared misconception.  Packer illustrates, through their 4th grade perspectives and experiences, how racism is entrenched in our society, and how it is socially reinforced and perpetuated. Packer reveals the dehumanizing and deleterious effects of racism through Laurel’s vivid first-person narrative. Her observations and keen insight eloquently expose racial prejudice as an underlying cause of human indignities and suffering.

Compared to the other girls in her Brownie troop, Laurel knows relatively little about the prejudice that African Americans experience.  Packer suggests that Laurel’s innocence and open-mindedness is attributed to the fact that she has not personally encountered racial discrimination, thereby depicting racism as a learned or acquired trait.  Raised in the suburbs of Atlanta, Laurel does not interact with white people.  For her, they are “like baby pigeons: real and exciting, but rarely seen or thought about”(4).  And, as baby pigeons are harmless and elusive, Laurel has no reason to view white people as threatening.  However, as a quiet, observant and sensitive girl, Laurel perceives something that she cannot yet articulate.  She is mesmerized by her friend Daphne’s award-winning poem:  “You are my father, the veteran / When you cry in the dark / It rains and rains and rains in my heart “(6).  In this poem, Daphne references her father’s experience with racism; he is a battle-scarred ‘veteran’ in the war against bigotry.  Daphne discerns his heartache, and articulates how she too feels his pain.  Although Daphne’s classmates do not understand the poem, Laurel finds it “eerie”(6).   This sensation foreshadows her future comprehension of its profound meaning.  And while Laurel has yet to experience racism firsthand, her gravitation toward Daphne’s poem demonstrates her capacity to empathize with the suffering of humanity on an emotional level.

When Laurel does encounter the white girls of Troop 909 who are also at the camp, she describes them as “instantly real and memorable, with their long, shampoo-commercial hair, straight as spaghetti from the box”(5).  Lauding their fair skin, Laurel describes their “complexions [as] a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla” to suggest that they are associated with sweetness and luxurious indulgence.  And, like delicious food, having creamy white skin is desirable (1).  Laurel’s physical characterizations of the white girls suggest a racial dissimilarity that initiates a tone of ‘us versus them’ from the beginning of the story.  And for Laurel and her fellow Brownies, the white girls engender a conflicting sense of awe and underlying resentment.  The Brownies appear to be victims of the ‘white’ standard of beauty that is socially promulgated through magazines and television commercials that create a sense of inferiority among black women for whom this ‘standard’ is physically unattainable.  And their continued alienation engenders “a reason for envy and hatred”(5).  In this way society reinforces and propagates racial stereotypes that provoke animosity.

Arnetta, the charismatic leader of the Brownie troop, is no stranger to racial prejudice.  And when she sees the white girls of Troop 909 she is immediately defensive and hostile.  She quickly disparages Troop 909 by claiming they “smell like Chihuahuas, Wet Chihuahuas”(2).  Back at school, anyone who is uncoordinated or dresses in a peculiar way is described as ‘Caucasian,’ and Arnetta references this derisive inside joke to label the white girls as “Caucasian Chihuahuas” to further degrade them (3).  Ironically, that Arnetta cannot “spell ‘Chihuahua,’ [and] has [n]ever seen a Chihuahua” indicates that perhaps she herself is prejudging the white girls and mimicking what she hears without any reflection (3).  She is looking for a confrontation and incites her troop when she falsely claims that one of the white girls called Daphne a racial slur.  Arnetta is a commanding figure, and when she speaks, “her tone ha[s] an upholstered confidence that [is] somehow both regal and vulgar at once.  It demanded a few moments of silence in its wake”(7).  To describe Arnetta’s confidence as “upholstered,” suggests a mask or ‘cover’ of her true feelings and character flaws.  Arnetta is a tyrannical bully, and although the Brownies do not want to fight the white girls, they are ‘silent’ because they are afraid to question her authority.  Arnetta will subjugate anyone who dares to challenge her by telling them to “shut up,” and she humiliates Laurel by nicknaming her “Snot”(8,9).  Because Arnetta is an abusive and intimidating leader, her troop will submissively follow her direction.  This phenomenon also occurs in society as well, as people often follow a dominant personality out of fear, ignorance or lack of confidence.

But Daphne is unable to follow Arnetta to battle.   When the Brownies arrive at the restroom to plan their confrontation with the white girls, they find a ‘mosaic’ of debris covering the floor.  “Daphne walked to the counter, took a clean paper towel, and carefully unfolded it like a map.  With it, she began to pick up the trash all around.  Everyone watched”(13).  Daphne purposefully and meticulously cleans the bathroom because she feels powerless to stop the enmity but is compelled to do something good, however small.  And the girls do not try to stop her because on some level they suspect that Arnetta is wrong.  When it is discovered that the white girls are echolalic and thus incapable of bigotry, the Brownies are dumbfounded.   Echolalia is a genetic condition in which one will ‘echo’ what is heard through “the meaningless repetition of words and phrases” (eod.com).  That the white girls suffer from echolalia, serves to demonstrate how racial prejudices are ‘echoed,’ or learned and repeated.  It also bespeaks how words can become distorted to engender an irrational mindset.  The story demonstrates how racial biases continue to perpetuate the ignorance and intolerance that causes suffering throughout generations.  And, like the mosaic of debris, the mosaic of black and white girls will suffer the reverberating effects of racism.

On the bus ride home, the Brownies are relatively subdued.  Though they had promised to punish the white girls and “teach them a lesson,” it was they who learned something on the camping trip (7).  When Arnetta responds to a question as to why they were “stuck at a camp with retarded girls,” the reason for her aggression becomes clear (25).  “My mama and I were in the mall in Buckhead, and this white lady just kept looking at us.  I mean, like we were foreign or something”(25).  She just stared, and said “nothing…she didn’t say nothing”(25).  Because Arnetta and her mother were degraded by the bigoted white woman, they too are ‘veterans’ of racism.  But Arnetta misdirects her anger toward innocent people.  And she demeans others because she has been demeaned; thus the cycle continues.

           Laurel likewise recalls a story when she and her father were at the mall and met a Mennonite family.  As humility and service are part of their religious doctrine, they came to Laurel’s home to paint her porch.  She recalls her father saying, “it was the only time he’d have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free”(27).  After her experience at the camp, Laurel understands her father’s motivation, “what he meant, and why he did it, though [she] didn’t like it”(27).  When asked if her father ‘thanked’ the Mennonites for their help, she responded “No…and suddenly [she] knew there was something mean in the world that [she] could not stop” (28).  This ‘something mean’ is the depravity of mankind that engenders their suffering.  Laurel is uncomfortable because her father did not appreciate the kindness of the Mennonites.  She realizes that racism hurts and debases both racist and victim of racism alike, and she wishes to end the cycle of suffering.  Packer emphasizes this phenomenon through the use of Laurel and Daphne’s names.  In Greek mythology, Apollo is shot by Eros’ gilded arrow that afflicts him with unbridled love for a woman Daphne who does not reciprocate.  Daphne transforms herself into a laurel tree to avoid Apollo, causing him to create a laurel wreath for himself (pantheon.org).  From this myth, the name ‘Daphne’ is historically associated with innocence and beauty.  And, as mythic Daphne literally transforms into a laurel, the Brownies Daphne and Laurel will merge to share a common empathy, as both understand of the underlying causes and effects of racism.  They realize how racism is perpetuated and that, “When you’ve been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others”(27).  As Arnetta sought to demean the girls of Troop 909, so Laurel’s father sought to demean the Mennonites; both in retaliation for their degradation.

           Through Laurel’s revelations and new consciousness, Packer affirms that humans are often vulnerable to prejudice and callousness regardless of race or heritage.  Bigotry and racism seem to be unstoppable because they are socially reinforced and passed from generation to generation.   Yet despite the suffering and unceasing hardships, Packer allows the reader some hope.  Through Daphne’s cleaning of the dirty restroom, and the Mennonites altruism and sacrifice, Packer demonstrates mankind’s capacity for empathy and compassion.  She closes her story with Arnetta asking if the Mennonites would “take off their long skirts and bonnets and put on some jeans,” to which Daphne serenely responds, “Maybe they would.  Just to be nice”(28).  Daphne’s sincere and positive response to Arnetta’s humorous cynicism is uplifting because, although ignorance and cruelty will always exist, perhaps we can enlighten though kindness, one ‘nice’ person at a time.