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Nature in “Prodigal Summer”

The natural world and all of its constituents have always, and will always be interconnected. “Prodigal Summer” by Barbara Kingsolver follows three storylines, “Predators,” “Moth Love,” and “Old Chestnuts,” connecting the environment in its most pure form to the surrounding world. While each story adopts its own individual narrative, the concept of how predators are handled and their importance to the balance of the ecosystem is discussed, providing commentary on the nature of life, itself. In Barbara Kingsolver’s “Prodigal Summer,” the use of figurative language and symbolism highlight the importance of nature and balance, revealing the motifs of life and morals.

Beginning in “Predators,” the connection to nature is made through Deanna’s journey of isolation and acceptance. In the beginning of the story, Deanna demonstrates the importance of all living things by using similes to compare nature to human life. Kingsolver writes, “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed,” (1). Comparing the discrete motion of a step and the aftermath to another living organism prompts Deanna to recognize the significance of all life forms.. What may be obsolete to one, is a considerable effect on another. This perspective continues through the entirety of “Predators” as Deanna experiences different forms of human emotion and its impact as a whole. Deanna views nature as an interconnected force, each action having an equally, if not greater impact. She says, “Simple math, one mosquito can make a bat happy for what, fifteen seconds before it starts looking for another one? But one bat might eat two hundred mosquitos in a night. [..] Who has a bigger influence on other lives?” (179). If one animal goes extinct, the whole balance of the ecosystem is derived from its thin trail. Deanna recognizes the importance of each living being, as it either provides food, or preys on another, creating an equilibrium of life.

As “Predators” progresses, nature and its importance to its surroundings relates to Deanna’s personal struggle with isolation and acceptance. Living alone on Zebulon Mountain for two years, the concept of seclusion had become her norm. Surrounded by the birds, the snakes, the coyotes, she had learned to appreciate the simplicities of order and purity. When Eddie Bondo stumbles into her life, she feels the uniquely human trait of infatuation. Knowing that this man shares none of her same beliefs or values, Deanna remains unequivocally drawn to this man. Kingsolver writes, “His scent burst onto her brain like a rain of lights, causing her to know him perfectly. This is how moths speak to each other. The wrong words are impossible when there are no words,” (PAGE NUMBER), relating her desire to be with Eddie to the instinctual habits of moths. To Deanna, the nature of the all organisms coincide. [Add more?]

The second story, “Moth Love,” explores the motif of life outside the natural world through relationships formed with others. Raised in tight-knit farming family from Lexington, Virginia, Lusa is quick to recognize the challenges of entering a new community. Her differentiated background led her to always feel like an outsider. After the death of her husband, Lusa is left with no sense of stability. She felt vurnerable when she was fully introduced to the family, as they had vendettas against her. Kingsolver writes, “[...] they had little to say to her and everything to say *about* her. Before Lusa herself ever set foot in Korger’s or the hardware store, she was already known as the Lexington girl who got down on all fours to name the insects in the parlor rather than squashing them,” (39). Lusa attempts time and time again to prove her worth to the Widner family, yet always falling short. She recognizes that the family itself was its own community, they had their own balance and, as explained in “Predators,” she was the introduction of prey, causing adjustments and adverse effects. As Lusa adjusts to the new atmosphere, her connections with the nature of the family become less hostile and she becomes more aware of her own values and virtues. Lusa realizes that the nature of life is not merely surviving, but becoming accustomed and adapting, she becomes more confident in her own role in the community.

The final story, “Old Chestnuts,” explores the connection of religion and belief to nature, demonstrating that the world is not in the discretion of one person, but rather the betterment of the whole. Garnett Walker, devoting his whole life to the conservation of the American Chestnut tree and a devout Christian, finds his beliefs regarding the correct way to interact with nature challenged when Nannie Rawley refuses to use pesticides on her farm, as they kill insects, disturbing the balance of the environment. “Old Chestnuts” shares a similar narrative to “Predators”, as the importance of life is discussed. Nannie explains, “Predator bugs don’t reproduce so fast, as a rule. But see, that works out right in nature because one predator eats a world of pest bugs in its life. The plant eaters have to go faster just to hold their ground. They’re in balance with each other,” (275). With the extermination of one pest, or of one predator, the entire balance which has been carefully constructed falls apart, resulting in too many or too few of one organism. One cannot pick and choose their surroundings in life out of convenience

In conclusion, the importance of nature throughout the entirety of “Prodigal Summer” by Barbara Kingsolver is illustrated by making connections to the world as a whole and forming relationships. In all three stories, “Predators,” “Moth Love,” and “Old Chestnuts,” natural order and balance are discussed, highlighting the importance of life and interconnectivity. For every action, there is an effect. As illustrated in both “Predators” and “Old Chestnuts,” the value of one life cannot be undermined by convenience. For every predator there is prey and between the two there is balance. Whether it be through human connection such as in “Moth Love” or the relationships formed in the natural world, “Prodigal Summer” illustrates the interconnected webs of life.