

Theme and Conflict in the *Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold

It often happens that authors reveal their personal experiences in their works. The novel *The Lovely Bones* by the American writer Alice Sebold is one of the kinds. Being a freshman at Syracuse University, the author was raped. Later, she wrote two novels where she rendered her feelings as the rapist's victim and showed changes that her life has undergone after the tragedy. In the novel *Lucky* she describes how the rape changed her life, and in the second novel *The Lovely Bones* the author describes a teenager being raped and murdered, who watches the events that happened aftermath from heaven. The current paper is concerned with the investigation of the theme and the conflict in this novel.

The conflict of the novel is between the protagonist and the forces that throw obstacles in her way. It seems that it is the conflict between the heaven where Susie lives and the life on Earth she once had. The most obvious representative of the antagonistic forces is the girl's killer, Mr. Harvey. But the problem is much deeper, as the main antagonist of the girl is grief and the acceptance that goes along with it. The theme of grief is the most obvious message of the writer in the novel. Sebold's point is that losing somebody becomes crucial for one's life. By her characters' examples she shows how grieving process affects all members of the victim's family. The conflict the Salmon family finds itself in is dubious in its nature: the battle against the murderer of their daughter and sister, on the one hand, and constant misunderstandings between the members of the family who try to come to terms with the tragedy, on the other. Still, in the end of her novel, Sebold speaks of the acceptance and a stabilized, new lifestyle that the family starts to live, thus giving a hope for better to the reader.

"My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973" (Sebold 1). So Susie's story starts, and this line informs the reader that something awful has happened, as the narrator speaks of herself in the past time. The line serves two functions, namely, it gives factual information about the narrator and sets the tone for the story. The girl admits that her second name is like the fish, so she was a small creature in the ocean of life who was absolutely dependent on the currents. The concept of small creatures is further developed by the author. When Susie worries about the penguin, her father tells her: "Don't worry, Susie; he has a nice life. He's trapped in a perfect world" (Sebold 1). But the girl seems to be right as small creatures are often hurt by others and their world turns upside down.

The reader comes to know that the girl was brutally raped and murdered, and now she narrates her story from heaven. Susie's description of heaven is striking: some places cross at a point, others do not. When Jesus Christ said "My Father's room has many mansions" he was talking about Susie's heaven (Sebold 10). Heaven is the place from which the girl can witness people and events on the Earth, no limitations set by time and space can prevent her from doing that. When one realizes that the girl is satisfied with her position after the death, it cannot but evoke the feeling of pain and desire to change the situation though nothing can be done as it is already too late.

The author's view of the concept of heaven seems to be very useful for understanding this symbol which helps to reveal the theme of grief:

To me, the idea of heaven would give you certain pleasures, certain joys - but it's very important to have an intellectual understanding of why you want those things. It's also about discovery, and being able to come to the

conclusions that elude you in life. So it's from the most simplistic things - Susie wants a duplex - to larger things, like being able to understand why her mother was always slightly distant from her. (Viner para. 9)

Thus, heaven symbolizes grief, on the one hand, and acceptance of the grief, on the other. The narrator has both of the feelings as well as her family does. Susie cannot overcome her loss; she follows her family and her beloved for years as she cannot let them go. He constantly observes the hunt for her body (only her elbow has been found), the search for her murderer, and the agonizing grief of her family. Her mother is in bracing under the weight of this grief, "a weight that she naively hoped might lighten someday, not knowing that it would only go on to hurt in new and varied ways for the rest of her life" (Sebold 40). As for Mr. Salmon:

Every day he got up, before sleep wore off, he was who he used to be. Then as his consciousness woke, it was as if poison had seeped in. At first he didn't even get up. He lay there under a heavy weight, the guilt on him, the hand of God pressing down on him saying, "You were not there when your daughter needed you". (Sebold 42)

Throughout Susie's narration we observe that she focuses more on the consequences that her rape and murder had on her family rather than on the event itself. Susie's mother leaves her father for eight years, her father becomes crippled with the process of catching the killer, her sister and brother become very distant from their previously idealistic family. Susie observes five stages of grief her parents and her sister move through: negation, rage, negotiation, depression, and admission. The idea of the lovely bones that gave way to the title of the novel reflects the state in which the world occurred after Susie's tragedy:

These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections — sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent — that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous lifeless body had been my life. (Sebold 356)

The author confesses that when she started to write *The Lovely Bones* she decided to break off to write *Lucky* we mentioned at the beginning. Sebold continues that the purpose was “to make sure that Susie wasn't saying everything that I wanted to say about violent crime and rape. OK, there aren't many women who come out and say they've been raped who also write a novel about violence. But when people discover you're a rape victim, they decide that's all you are” (Viner para. 21). In the *Lucky* the author talks about her life before and after the rape and describes how she felt about the event. The novels are similar in their themes, but the *Lucky* sounds more autobiographic than *The Lovely Bones*.

One more work that is concerned with grief that rape causes is Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*. Though the theme is disclosed through a different perspective here – after being raped by a popular senior the main character loses ability to speak – the message of the author is the same. She speaks of the drastic effects of being raped that change one's life once and forever. In this work more emphasis is placed on the way society ignores her personal tragedy being unwilling to understand and to help her.

In all these three works the disasters that rape brings are depicted with much skillfulness of the author. Kakutani's review of *The Lovely Bones* states: "The novel

is an elegy... about a vanished place and time and the loss of childhood innocence." Sebold adds "It's about living an extraordinary ordinary life [...] People who are living their lives very much attached to the people around them, family, maybe, but also community and friends" (Viner para. 31).

We suppose that the value of the three works considered is not rooted in the significance of the theme described only, but in the hope for better that the authors managed to give the reader. The authors never tried to deny the fact that grieving after the loss of dear people is not simply a problem of time, or that other consequences of rape are easily avoided. They did realize the significance of the issue and made the readers believe that with the help of others the grievances can be reduced to a minimum. This is where the main value of the works is rooted.

Works Cited

Sebold, Alice. *The Lovely Bones*. New Jersey: Back Bay Books, 2007.

Viner, Katharine. "Above and Beyond." *Guardian*. Aug. 2002. 18 April 2008

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