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07/12/16

Close Reading and Style Imitation

**Close Reading:**

 Karen Russell’s excerpt from “Reeling for the Empire” creates a stressful and anxious mood while at the same time leaving the reader transfixed on the otherworldly beast and silk-reelers. Russell starts with a description of “the Machine.” The Machine is obviously of great significance because Russell has capitalized a seemingly general word used to define a variety of things, giving it more of a formidable presence. By calling it the Machine, Russell is also giving it a persona—a specific name; it is not just a regular machine. The Machine is described as a “great steel-and-wood” beast with dozens of “rotating eyes and steaming mouths.” It is evident that the Machine is dangerous, but the reader is not quite sure why. Additionally, by giving it human/beast-like, otherworldly qualities, the beast is terrifying but it also difficult to look away from it. Russell uses impacting action and movement in her description of the Machine. It has ‘rotating’ eyes; ‘steaming’ mouths; ‘flashing’ teeth and it is ‘ever-spinning’. The actions used to describe parts of the Machine are nearly constant, making it seem all-knowing and always present. The central reeler is “capped with rows of flashing metal teeth,” once again showing the reader that the Machine is not merely an inanimate machine, but a ‘living’ thing that is also frightening. So much of Russell’s description of the Machine seems like a warning. It is a beast that has dozens of eyes and mouths and rows of metal teeth—the Machine is threatening and its presence is looming and haunting.

 Russell then gives the reader a more definitive answer of what the Machine is, showing its action and function: “pulleys swing our damp thread left to right across it, refining it into finished silk.” At this point, the reader is aware of the Machine’s tasks, which is to turn thread into silk; but since the Machine has been anthropomorphized, it is clear that it is not just a standard silk reeler, it is something much more than that. Its pulleys swing left-to-right, swinging and refining. Russell’s rhythmic description of the Machine is at the same time choppy and flowing, creating a stressful but also haunting mood. The short sentences, interjections and clauses make the reader pause and reflect on the nature and function of a machine—its purpose being to make or assemble something in particular; so although the Machine is described as beast, it is still, after all, a machine that serves a specific purpose.

 One of the girls, Tooka, “shivers and says it looks as if the Machine is smiling at us.” Once again, the Machine is given human-like qualities; qualities that are haunting when combined with Tooka’s reaction of shivering. The machine is overwhelming; and instead of a smile that comforts, it is a smile that frightens Tooka. Kaiko-joko, the name for the silk-reelers, are sitting at the work bench in front of the “giant wheel” of the Machine, and they are “pulling glowing threads” from their fingers. Not only are the women spinning thread into silk, the reader sees that the women are actually the source of the thread, with it coming directly out of their fingers. The women are ‘pulling’, ‘stretching’, ‘reeling’. All of these actions imply stress and anxiety. The women are working hard and they are tired from being forced to continue performing these actions. The Machine’s beastly and dominating presence (steaming mouths, rotating eyes, flashing metal teeth) is a warning for the women to continue ‘pulling’ and ‘stretching’, because it will get angry if the reeling stops. They are “stretching threads across their reeling frames like zither strings,” like they are playing a musical instrument that creates a “stinging music.” The ‘stinging music’ is sad and distressing—it is not comforting, but anxiety-inducing and painful. Tooka and the Kaiko-joko are being forced to work with the Machine and make silk, and the Machine is part of what is threatening them to continue working.

 Russell uses metaphor and anthropomorphism in this passage to show the reader that the Machine is much more than a simple, harmless silk-reeler. The Machine is at best an unnerving and overwhelming presence, but at its worst, a large beast that serves as a constant warning for them to keep reeling silk. Furthermore, Russell has also used zoomorphism, giving Tooka and the Kaiko-joko animal-like qualities, since they are spinning silk from thread produced by their own bodies. At the end of the passage, Russell describes the task of reeling silk as a “stinging music.” The stinging music is created by weaving and reeling the silk while using the Machine, and the frightening descriptions of the Machine make it clearer that what is being produced by the women is mournful and painful. The Machine is a beast that has forced the Kaiko-joko to play “stinging music”—which can be seen as both a mental and a physical anguish.

Works Cited

Russell, Karen. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. Random House, 2013.

**Style Imitation:**

The Mountain looks like a brooding old man with a thousand sparkling teeth jutting from his pale mouth—it reached as high as the clouds and its massive size nearly covered the sky. The peak is a treacherous and shifting rock, capped with glittering bones. Ropes move our stiffened bodies left to right, then up, to reach the summit. Ruby shivers and says it looks as if the dark clouds are frowning at us. I reach up to the ledge, pulling myself up until my feet dangle, my fingers locking onto a crevice. Like a cramp-iron.