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The Tragedy of Losing a Loved One:

Fallon’s Rhetorical Journey to Overcome this Grief

In 2007, Taryn Davis lost her husband to the war in Iraq. Ever since that devastating moment, she has been searching for ways to fill the hole in her life (Dart). Afraid to show any signs of true happiness, Davis claims, “I want people to know that grief is a lifetime process,” (Davis qtd. Dart). The issue of losing a loved one in war should not be taken lightly. Davis and all other military spouse widows will have to struggle with the tragedy that occurred for the rest of their lives. Siobhan Fallon, a fellow military spouse, exemplifies this issue that is commonly seen in military families within her collection of short stories, *You Know When the Men are Gone.* The genre of her short stories are considered to be home front fiction because it demonstrates the impacts that war has on family life without all the actual gruesome details of war. At the time of publication, there had not been many books published in regards to this genre. Therefore, in order to inform Americans on the inevitable consequences resulting from war, the intended general audience for these war narratives are civilians who do not have any personal relatives involved in the military. The short story, “Gold Star,” is about a character, Josie Schaeffer, who lost her husband because he sacrificed his life to save a fellow soldier. Throughout the story, Josie struggles to overcome the grief she feels because of her loss (Fallon 209). Although Fallon’s use of symbolism in this particular short story suggests that losing a loved one to war is often seen as a problem that can be easily resolved in the eyes of others, her utilization of imagery appeals to the emotions of Americans who possess strong familial values and to those who may or may not have direct experience with dealing with military women who have recently become widowed. In doing so, Fallon attempts to make readers consider the fact that mourning the death of a loved one is an unpleasant yet inevitable task. Each individual copes differently from tragic events so one must be aware of a military widow’s needs before attempting to console her.

Fallon uses symbolism in this short story in order to show how individuals believe that widows are emotionally capable of moving past a devastating incident and can continue to live their lives easily. This appeals to Americans who have a strong sense of family values because they are aware that this can never be easy for anyone. Following the death of her husband in war, the military “awarded” Josie with the privilege of a Gold Star Family designated parking spot at the local grocery store (Fallon 209). Fallon relates the receiving of gold star privileges to, “schoolchildren receiving A’s and stickers for a job well done” (Fallon 210). Because of the positive connotation associated with it, the gold star symbolizes a consolation prize. The military makes it seem as if Josie had willingly given up her husband’s life for the sake of the war. This ultimately reveals the insensitivity the military has towards widows. By describing the recognition Josie receives from other military families because she has these privileges, Fallon suggests that those who have not personally lost a loved one to war do not fully understand how difficult it is for the widows to overcome their grief. For example, in the short story, an older gentleman says to Josie, “I’m grateful for your sacrifice” (Fallon 210). The older man does not acknowledge the fact that Josie is struggling from her loss. The issue regarding the insensitivity widows often encounter is exemplified in an article for *USA Today,* in which Gregg Zoroya interviews a fellow gold star recipient Jane Horton. Jane claims that the gold star is, “like an outward expression of a burden carried deep inside”(Horton qtd. Zoroya). This quote shows that Americans who have not personally lost any loved ones to war do not consider the struggles that widows face. Even though the military has good intentions with handing out gold star privileges, widows such as Horton and Josie do not appreciate having the gold star title. In general, Fallon’s audience may comprehend that widows often find themselves receiving insensitive comments from others. However, they may struggle to understand the emotional impacts of becoming widowed.

Fallon uses imagery to demonstrate how Josie’s behavior and personality has changed after the death of her husband in order to give readers a sense of how women are affected by the death of a loved one. For example, in preparation for a visitor, “Josie looked around the cluttered kitchen with its unwashed dishes, the stacks of newspapers and books covering her dining room table, the laundry she had washed the week before had piled up on her couch, still not folded,” (Fallon 211). By elaborately describing Josie’s home as “cluttered” and disorderly, readers are able to visualize how Josie has not been keeping up with the cleanliness of her home. Thus, Fallon suggests that losing a loved one can cause women to behave in unusual ways. According to Tara Parker-Pope, a writer for the *New York Times*, claims, “clutter and disorganization are often symptoms of a bigger health problem. People who have suffered an emotional trauma or a brain injury often find housecleaning an insurmountable task.” Pope suggests that failing to keep an orderly home can be a possible sign of depression caused by a traumatic experience. Josie’s behavior exemplifies Pope’s assertion because the trauma of losing her husband has lead to her becoming uninterested in maintaining the cleanliness of her home. Individuals with strong familial values can empathize with Josie because they are aware of the fact that losing a loved one can display negative effects on all aspects of family life at home.

Fallon’s use of imagery also makes readers sympathize with Josie in regards to her struggles by aptly describing the physical changes she is experiencing. In doing so, Fallon attempts to show readers how the emotional impacts of losing a loved one can be outwardly expressed. Just like any recently widowed women, Josie has been too preoccupied with dealing with her emotions. Consequently, she has neglected her physical appearance. Fallon describes Josie as having “bags under her eyes that never faded even when the crying finally did; her shoulders were curled into themselves as if she were trying to keep something fragile and cracked safe inside her ribs; and the weight she’d lost in the past three months had exacerbated the creases in her forehead and around her mouth,” (Fallon 212). Because the words “fragile” and “cracked” are commonly used to describe glass, Fallon incorporates these adjectives into the description in order to create a visualization of the extreme delicate state of being Josie is in after losing her husband. Thus, Fallon’s audience is able to conceptualize the difficultly associated with losing someone important. Using the term “exacerbated” to describe the creases formed in Josie’s forehead provokes a strong emotional response in the readers because it carries a very negative connotation. If Fallon had instead chosen to use a word that carries a positive connotation, such as “magnified,” to describe Josie’s creases, she would not have been able to accurately communicate to readers the extent of how widows are impacted by losing a loved one. After acknowledging how losing a loved one can affect the physical appearance of widows, readers must be aware of how mourning is difficult for women.

Fallon also utilizes imagery in this particular short story in order to show readers that losing a loved one is difficult for women. By describing Josie as reminiscing over the moments she shared with her husband, Fallon captures the attention of her intended audience who possess strong familial values. Josie thinks back to a time when her husband returned home after exercising for a week (Fallon 214). Josie would sit on his lap and “smell all the days he had been away in his uniform, the dirt from the field and the burned smokiness of his sweat, the thin smell of gasoline from his Humvee and the oil he used to clean his knife,” (Fallon 214). By claiming that Josie could remember the smell of “all the days” her husband was gone, Fallon suggests that it would be devastating for Josie if she could no longer remember her husband’s simple qualities that she fell in love with. Readers are able to capture a true sense of the aroma Josie’s husband carried with him, as well as the emotions Josie is experiencing by including phrases such as “burned smokiness.” This phrase creates a melancholy tone in the passage. Fallon strategically decided to create this tone in order to demonstrate that mourning the death of a loved one is never pleasant. To add to the unpleasant task of mourning her fallen soldier, Josie keeps photos of her husband in plain sight in order to never forget him (Fallon 216). According to the American Psychological Association, grieving individuals tend to, “celebrate the lives of a loved one,” (“Grief: Coping with the Loss of your Loved One”). Josie is celebrating the life of her husband because the photos she keeps out were all from her favorite moments she spent with him. She wishes to cherish the moments when they were still together. By describing Josie as celebrating her husband’s life, Fallon suggests to the audience that this is Josie’s way of coping from the traumatic event of losing her husband. Each widow mourns in unique ways.

In addition to insisting readers consider different coping mechanisms, Fallon’s use of imagery forces readers to acknowledge that each newly widowed military women have different needs. After her husband’s funerals, military families would often attempt to comfort Josie by giving her simple gifts such as flowers. However, Josie despises every aspect of funerals (Fallon 215). When the wives of fellow soldiers gave her flowers, “the smell made her think of wet dirt thumping down on the coffin, black high heels that pinched her toes, and the Kleenex that disintegrated into pulp…” (Fallon 215-216). Although the images that this phrase produces are all common features associated with funerals, Josie finds them disturbing. By describing Kleenex that “disintegrated” into pulp, Fallon is creating a visualization of the deterioration of Josie’s emotional and mental wellbeing following the death of her husband. This deterioration is single-handedly enhanced by the usage of the verb “disintegrated” because of its strong negative emotional connotation. The response it produces allows readers to perceive the extent of how Josie finds typical aspects of funerals to be displeasing. It is common for widows to not enjoy funerals. Thus, individuals should consider the needs of widows before attempting to console them.

Ultimately, Fallon utilizes various literary techniques such as symbolism and imagery in order to appeal to her audience, who is predominately Americans who share familial values and have little to no experience with dealing with widows. Besides the fact that Fallon attempts to make her audience realize the insensitivity widows often face, she also attempts to inform readers on the difficulty associated with mourning a lost loved one. Because of her direct experience in dealing with military families, Fallon understands that importance of recognizing the different needs each widow may possess. She is attempting to bring about change in the way her audience perceives widows.

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