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Nature as Symbol in *Eli the Good*

Silas House’s novel *Eli the Good* is narrated by an adult Eli Book who recalls the summer of 1976 from a journal that he kept when he was ten years old. This story is a coming-of-age story that transitions Eli from childhood towards young adulthood. Eli observes the world around him a great detail. House emphasizes the issues of cancer, the aftermath of war, suicide, divorce, and rebellion along with conflicts of childhood. While the country is celebrating its two hundred years of freedom, the Book family is impacted with family challenges. In the novel, House uses elements in nature, such as the river and the trees, to symbolize spiritual truth that touches the lives of the characters, in particular Eli and Edie.

The first element of nature that House introduces is the Refuge River, a symbol of strength in the novel. A river continues to flows around twists and bends, always flowing towards its destination. Like the river, life carries on the same way; it is always in motion, moving forward in time. No matter what conflict arises in life, we continue move forward, and sometimes strength is needed to carry on. Eli faces new struggles on a daily basis but continues on with great strength just like the river. Eli makes a change in his life, overcoming a childhood struggle by standing up to his friends Matt and Paul for the first time. Eli splits Matt’s lip, and afterwards, he washes his hands in the river and tastes it. House writes, “The water was warm and immediately comforting to the smarts of pain that ran all the way to the tips of my fingers. I had the sudden urge to taste the river. I bought my hand around to cup up some of the water, but when I put it to my
Sharley Cooper

mouth, all I could taste was blood” (177). This moment represents a change and a turning point in Eli’s life. He is no longer the spineless little boy that wants to please his friends but a man of valor. It took a lot of courage and strength for Eli to take this stand against his friends. Eli embraced this challenge and carried on with his life, knowing it was time to leave Matt and Paul behind.

Another element in nature that House uses to reveal hidden ideas about the characters are the trees. He uses three different types of trees to represent individual traits of the characters. The trees represent protection, stability, comfort and healing. For instance, according to The Touchwood Society, a group that is dedicated to re-connecting people with nature using the power of trees, the willow tree is known for its many characteristics such as healing, protection and medical properties (“Tree Lore”). House uses the willow tree in reference to Edie because it offers her healing and comfort when she is faced with the difficult situation of her parents getting a divorce and her mother abandoning her. Eli mentions that Edie’s parents needed a divorce because they fought all the time, resulting in Edie often retreating to the willow tree. Eli explains, “Usually when this happened, Edie hid out in the high branches of her willow tree….” (House 51). The willow tree provided Edie with consolation and comfort.

The beech tree is known for several traits including tolerance, past knowledge and preservation of writing knowledge for generations to come (“Beech”). Eli lets it be known early in the novel that he wants to become a writer, which is probably why he unconsciously chooses the beech tree as his secret hiding place (House 12). In writing his story, Eli indeed preserves for generations to come the knowledge he gains that summer. The beech tree grows slowly and the trunk is smooth, the way Eli’s life should
Sharley Cooper

be at this time but is not. House uses the beech tree to represent certainty and stability for Eli. Eli feels intense emotions toward his father, including hatred, fright and a longing to make him proud. Besides that, everything in Eli’s life is changing at a rapid pace. Eli needs something in his life that he can recognize and that is not changing, and he finds it in the beech tree: “I appreciated beeches in particular because their leaves don’t fall off in the autumn but cling to the branches until new, bright green leaves come back in the spring. All through the winter the brown, shriveled autumn leaves hang there, staying with the tree” (House 92). This description suggests that in the life of the beech tree, there are no sudden changes, something that Eli needs at this time in his life when everything is changing rapidly. The adult Eli also states, “This beech tree is solid, unmovable” (House 292), signifying that the beech tree is deeply rooted and represents stability. The beech tree clearly gives Eli the qualities he needs to endure the unstability and the uncertainty that he encounters in his family life.

The snowball tree symbolizes a place of refuge for Eli and Edie. Eli and Edie often use the snowball tree to escape from troubling issues. The snowball tree was planted by Eli’s mother to commemorate his father’s surviving the Vietnam War (House 128). It is not a coincidence that the tree offers a beneficial quality of shielding and protecting the children since this is what a mother does for her young naturally. Edie hides out within the snowball bush often when her parents fight (House 51). Eli hides out there when Josie teases him about Edie (House 128). As an adult, Eli says, “The snowball bush held [him] and Edie like a flowery womb” (283). This simile indicates that the snowball tree functioned as a safe haven for Eli and Edie.
In *Eli the Good*, House uses the attributes of nature to represent the invisible traits of the characters. Through the memoirs of his main character, Eli, House demonstrates the deep connection that one can have with nature. Eli never forgets how the elements in nature make him feel. He remembers how the elements comfort him and give him the ability to sustain the trials that he is going through. He never forgets what the trees in his childhood mean to him. That meaning is expressed by Nell when she tells Eli, “There is not a tree in the world like the ones you grow up with. You never forget them, and the trees remember you” (House 221). As an adult, Eli validates this truth: “I recall Nell saying to me that she came back to see all of us that summer but also came back to see the trees, that you never forget the trees of your childhood, and that –more important – they never forget you. She was right” (House 291). By the end of that pivotal summer in 1976, Eli Book has completed his transitioning from childhood to young adulthood. Eli spends his last moments in the summer of freedom with his secret beech tree, enjoying nature and writing, taking in everything that had happened that summer. He sits there until he falls asleep and his father retrieves him. His father promises him that everything is going to be all right (House 292).
Sharley Cooper

Works Cited

