“Monster” by Dennis Saddleman- An analysis

Residential schools have caused irreparable harm to First Nations peoples in Canada, harm that is still felt, to this day. Many aboriginal authors and poets have written about the residential school experience however the poem “Monster”, a spoken word poem, written by Dennis Saddleman, a residential school survivor, and was shared by him at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, provides a very powerful and insightful illustration of the experience. The poem is about Saddleman’s own experiences at residential school. It begins with him describing the residential school as a heartless monster. He then he expands upon that metaphor to help share his experiences and feelings about what happened to him, as well as emphasize the impact it had on his feelings of self worth. After sharing his experience, he relates the painful process of confronting his past and coming to terms with it through confronting the “monster” which allows him to start the journey of healing and forgiveness. In order to relate his experience to the reader, he uses a variety of methods. Firstly, he uses strong figurative language to help the reader relate to his experience. Secondly, he makes use of various literary techniques to help us understand his message. Lastly, he uses specific examples of his experience to help us understand his emotions during his ordeal. Overall, Saddleman, uses these methods to effectively convey his message about the harmful effects of residential school, and the need for survivors to forgive, in order to allow the healing process to begin, so that they can move on with their lives with hope, dreams and dignity.

One method Saddleman uses to convey the negative impacts of residential school in his poetry is through the use of figurative language. One device he uses very effectively is extended metaphor. He does this by comparing the residential school itself to a monster and describing how it chewed the “Indian out of” him. For example in the poem when he says the monster’s

Wide mouth took…/[him and its] yellow stained teeth chewed/

the Indian out of…/[him and its] teeth crunched…[his] language/

grinded …[his] rituals and…[his] traditions. (32-36)

By visualizing these lines as the monster chews up his “Indianness” and comparing the residential school to the monster he makes it easier for the reader to understand how helpless and scared he must have felt when his language, culture and traditions were taken away. Personification is another device used for effect by Saddleman. By giving human characteristics to the throat of the monster and describing how its “throat muscles squeezed…[his] happiness…[his] dreams….[and his] native voice” (46-48) he helps the reader vicariously experience how these qualities were crushed out of him by his time at residential school. A third device, cleverly used by him to deliver his message, is his use of pun at the end of the poem. For example, he uses a pun about the 4 stories of the residential school building in these final four lines of the poem,

Stories of hope/stories of dreams/stories of renewal/

and stories of tomorrow. (135-139)

By using the two different meanings of the word story, we are able to see the 4 stories of the building, as the beginning of the next journey of his life. This helps us experience the weight of his anger being lifted off his shoulder which allows him to start anew on his journey in which he will be able to create positive stories about hopes and dreams of the future, and find renewal and transformation. As one can see, figurative language is used expertly to express his message in the poem.

A second method utilized by the poet to help the reader understand his message is shown through his use of literary elements. One element he uses to do this is repetition. For instance, throughout the poem, the line “I hate you, residential school/ I hate you” (1-2) is continuously repeated. This helps the reader understand how much the poet hates residential school because he says it over and over. Another literary element used effectively by Saddleman is tone. For example, in the poem the tone of the poet goes from angriness, shown in his hatred towards the monster, to sorrow, demonstrated by the remorse of the monster, and then to hope, illustrated by his “diploma of survival” (132) where he expresses hope for the future. By varying the tone of his message, the poet helps us relive his journey, and better understand the emotions he has experienced, as his perspective changes. Lastly, point of view is used to help convey his theme. Specifically this is shown when he switches from him relating his experience, to having the monster express its feelings about what happened. By letting us look at the situation from multiple perspectives it assists us in understanding how Saddle man is able to forgive the “monster” for what happened to him, and move on. Overall, the use of literary techniques greatly adds to the readers’ ability to the poem.

A third method in which Dennis Saddleman helps us understand his theme is through sharing specific examples of his experience with us so we can empathize with his experience. One type of specific example he uses is ones that show fear. For example, in the poem he describes evil “monster eyes watching” (18) while “terrified children/cower with shame” (19-20) as he talks about arriving at the residential school. By using specifics, he allows us to enter the mind of the child and put ourselves in their shoes which helps us understand how scared he felt. A second type of situation he describes is ones where he expresses hate and anger. One instance of this is when he is expressing his anger at things that had happened to him such as wetting his bed and falling asleep in church which he got punished for. He responds by calling it a monster whose “veins …[were] clotted with/cruelty and torture…/[and whose] blood [was] poisoned with loneliness and despair” (67-68). Describing his feelings in relation to what happened helps us understand the depth of hate and anger he felt towards the school and his experience. Lastly, he shares examples of his resilience in the face of the adversity he goes through. For example in the poem he survives multiple types of trauma and punishment for speaking his language, practicing his traditions, and simply being a child where he is punished for wetting the bed. His perseverance in the face of such atrocities illustrates his resilience, which can be seen in the line where he says that the residential school is “where…[he] earned…[his] diploma of survival.” (132-134) By sharing these experiences with the reader it helps us empathize with the difficulties he faced and how hard it would have been to forgive what was done to him, which demonstrates his strength. Through all of these shared experiences we are given a chance to live in his experience, if only vicariously, which helps us understand how terrible residential schools were.

As one can see residential schools were horrible and inflicted the vilest atrocities on the children who were forced to attend. Dennis Saddleman’s poem “Monster” helps us get a glimpse into the evil that was residential school. Through the use of figurative language, literary elements and shared experiences, he allows the reader to join him in a journey to the past: to relive his anger and hurt, to confront his past and allow himself to forgive, and to move on, with hope and dreams to the future. By using these methods, Saddleman masterfully delivers his message about the devastating, long lasting, consequences of residential school, and the necessity for survivors to find a way to forgive, so that the healing process can begin, and they can move on with their lives with hope, dreams and dignity, steadfast in their resilience.