

Hieroglyphics: by Anne Donovan.

Hieroglyphics is an emotional short story relating to the traumatic school experiences of Mary Ryan, a young girl struggling to cope with her undiagnosed dyslexia. The story takes us through her primary and secondary experiences, and also the differences in the way teachers treat her, and also how Mary herself doesn't know what is wrong with her, since she's the only one in her classes who is struggling so much. No teachers think to test her to figure out what is wrong, and just class her as 'dumb'. We see how Mary learns to cope with her problem, and how she discovers hieroglyphics as a way to communicate. Through her choice of characters and captivating plot, Anne Donovan has managed to touch us all as readers, allowing us to empathise with Mary all throughout the story.

In the story, we get a glimpse of what life and school are like for a dyslexic child, when there is no support available. Mary Ryan, the main character of the story, is the narrator, and tells us her thoughts and feelings throughout her classes. We learn how she feels left out, since the other children treat her differently since she is simply not the same as them, of course they do not understand why. The story is written in a Glasgow dialect, meaning we find it harder to understand, giving us a small impression of what it is like for a dyslexic person trying to read. The story is set in Drumchapel, a small area in Glasgow, making it all seem more realistic as it is not that far away from home, showing us it can happen anywhere, even possibly here. The opening paragraphs really sets the story off well, as it gives us an insight into what happens in Mary's mind when she tries to read. The first line, "ah mind they were birlin and dancing roond like big black spiders", compares the words she is trying to read, to spiders, which move fast and don't ever do what you want them to. Spiders tend to be seen as scary and intimidating, so we can imagine that is how she sees reading, as something threatening that she just doesn't want to tackle. The word "black" also adds to the intensity, giving it all a bleak feeling. The rest of the paragraph "Ah couldnae keep a haunle on them fur every time ah thoat ah'd captured them, tied them thegither in some kindy order, they just kept on escaping." The idea of them being everywhere helps us understand also that she feels surrounded by something she just cannot comprehend. We can imagine how scared she gets, like when people are really petrified of spiders, they occasionally freeze out of shock and can't do anything, that's what Mary is like when it comes to reading on her own, completely unable. The words "tied", "escapin" and "captured" are all used here out of the usual context we would expect them in, and we can therefore imagine the struggle she is going through when she tries to read. We could even compare her to a prison guard trying to keep the letters under

control, but it just doesn't happen.

After reading the first paragraph, it begins to trigger a sympathetic response in us, as we can feel her frustration, and begin to understand how she is feeling.

In primary school, work and Mary just didn't go together. When she couldn't cope, and didn't understand properly, the teachers were just useless, and instead of actually trying to help, just branded her as 'dumb' and gave her easy jobs so they got away with no hard work, which was obviously no benefit to Mary. Although Mary may have enjoyed this, as she didn't have to struggle, the consequences were not worth it, as Mary never learnt to read and write properly. The teachers didn't care about what was actually going on in her head, although on one occasion, she was tested to see her reading and writing ages, which were extremely low compared to her actual age, and the ability of everyone around her. Throughout primary school, Mary enjoys herself, as there are no struggles, although we feel sorry for her as her peers are progressing and learning new skills, while she stays the same, unable to read + write properly.

As Mary goes up to secondary school, she is still treated as 'dumb' and is on the list for remedial classes. We see her struggling right from the first day, when the simple task of copying out rules proves to be a battle for her, she can see what she wants to put down on the paper, and tries, but it's a battle she is losing, and it just doesn't work out well. She even classes it as a "dug's dinner", as she can tell herself that it isn't up to the same standard as that of the people around her. Mary has very little self confidence, not that any one else has confidence in her however, the teachers just see her as something they have to put up with, not something which they could easily attempt to fix. Since we can see that what should be a simple, easy task, is quite the opposite for Mary, we can imagine a sense of hopelessness for her, and we begin to wonder that if she can't manage that then how will she begin to hope with the actual lessons? Already, after only her first day, she feels embarrassed and belittled, and nervous of what is to come.

Most of the pupils have a serious dislike for Mr Kelly, as he just isn't a very likeable character, with his sarcastic comments and use of bad humour. Him and Mary get off on the wrong foot immediately, with him saying that her work was illegible, and this annoys Mary instantly, as she knows it is not her fault. He is a very sarcastic teacher, especially when it comes to pupils who aren't quite perfect. For example, he liked to be mean to pupils, by dictating notes just too fast for anyone to copy, let alone Mary, who lacks in ability compared to the rest. He makes a number of under-mining comments towards her, which cannot have

helped with her self confidence at all, “precisely Mary, and since the function of reading is to communicate, what point is there in writing something which is utterly unintelligible.” Mary can handle Mr Kelly’s comments however, and replies with “but if you were an Egyptian you could read hieroglyphics, sur.” Mr Kelly obviously didn’t appreciate this comment, and from then on his hatred for the poor girl just grew stronger and stronger, all because she couldn’t do something he took for granted.

Miss Niven was the complete opposite to Mr Kelly, she liked to point out all the good things in everyone, even if she was offering false praise to Mary, when she said “Amir has produced a wonderful imaginative piece... and look how neatly Mary’s coloured in the borders of the wall display.” Although she may feel like she is being nice, she is just exaggerating the contrast of ability between pupils, and is, without meaning to, belittling Mary just like Mr Kelly does, although he’s just a bit more obvious. This makes Mary feel small and insignificant compared to the others. Miss Niven, along with all the other teachers doesn’t realise that Mary is fully aware of their opinions in her, as when Miss Niven adds “She’s a poor wee soul...”, Mary makes the comment “obviously no bein able tae read makes ye deif.” We can see then that Mary has a pretty mature sense of humour, which is needed for her, as she has to go through a lot compared to others. Miss Niven excludes Mary from the majority of work, meaning she is never given the chance to improve and learn something, she is stuck doing the same thing repeatedly, which is just pointless. We look at this and see that although Miss Niven is trying to be kind and not make Mary struggle, she is just wasting her time, as she is not gaining anything from being in her class.

After only looking at the title of the short story, we would imagine the story to be something to do with Egyptians, or something which is important and cherished, as hieroglyphics are in today’s world. We would at least expect the story to be positive, but things don’t turn out this way, and we see the word hieroglyphics being used negatively, as an insult by Mr Kelly.

The story goes from Mary feeling left out - as she shows when she says “ah fund masel oot the dance wioot a partner. And it wasnae nice,” we see then how she feels insecure, and not confident in herself at all - to her being confident after writing a story in her own version of hieroglyphics, and she produces a piece of work of which she is proud of. She had finally found a way of written communication, even if its not the same as everyone else’s, but something unique to her, which fills her with confidence. She actually describes her own work as “neat”, which is a sharp contrast to the “dugs dinner” she began with. When she ‘plants’ her story on top of the pile, in the middle of the teachers desk, it gives us

a very good ending, full of positivity compared to the negativity at the beginning.