

**Mary Ryan is a character that creates a mixture of feelings in the reader: sadness, pity and admiration. Show how the writer successfully portrays Mary’s ability to cope with her disadvantages in the story and overcome her difficulties to evoke strong emotions in those around her.**

“Hieroglyphics” by Anne Donovan is a very appealing and inspirational short story, concentrating on the learning difficulties a young girl has to cope with. The main character in this story is a girl called Mary who is struggling with dyslexia and the social prejudices she has to tolerate from the people surrounding her.

Mary is a very optimistic and intelligent 12 year old and in this story her thought and feelings are explained with the story carefully being written in first person narrative using Scots language.

Mary manages to overcome the difficulties in her learning by remaining proud of all the work she produces and not being ashamed of the person she is and the point that she cannot read and write as well as others her age. This portrays the positive and important message to be yourself and not allow others to ridicule you.

Mary’s problems are dismissed in primary school and she is treated extremely unfairly. Her teachers assumed she was not putting the effort she should have been into her assignments and not achieving the level of work she was capable of: “She

lacks concentration”. They somewhat recognised that the problems she was having were authentic, “No, I don’t think she’s lazy, there is a genuine difficulty there”, but when Mary was given extra assistance she was made to feel like a nuisance to the teacher. She believed Mary was a sluggish child and understood that because of that her problems had escalated: “A hink she thout ah wis lazy”. This teacher had no patience with Mary and when she could not do the work she was distributing to her she began to “get a bit scunnered”. She made no effort to understand why Mary could not carry out the simple tasks of reading and writing: “naebdy ever asked me whit it wis like”. When the lessons with this teacher were finished the way in which the school handled Mary got worse. They allowed her to do the things she was capable of doing and enjoyed, whilst at the same time missing out on vital teaching lessons that could have been used to help her improve on her literacy skills: “Maisty the time the teachers gied me the colourin in tae dae”. The primary school should have detected the problems Mary had early on in her schooling and made sure she received an education to suit her needs. This evokes frustration and anger within the reader.

Mary’s mother did not evidently bother about Mary’s “daftness”. She did recognise that her daughter had a problem with her learning but did not pay much attention to this aspect of her life, putting it down to Mary’s supposed laziness at school and stupidity: “She’s lazy, ye mean”, “Ma mammy thout ah wis daft”. She allowed Mary to continue carrying out practical tasks that she was able to complete without having to read or write: “Ma mammy knew ah could go the messages an dae stuff roond the hoose and talk tae folk, ah wis jist daft at school subjects”.

Eventually Mary found herself in an isolated situation, with nobody understanding the problems she had and the way she felt. The lack of understanding she experiences from the adults around her creates pity for Mary: “but neabdy ever asked me whit wis gaun oan in ma heid. So ah never tellt them”.

The simile, “Ah mind they were birlin and dancing roond like big black spiders”, refers to the way in which Mary perceives the words she is trying to read. This is effective because it provides an image of the words being alive and moving about the page, resembling the confusing way in which Mary sees the letters. The letters are particularly described as spiders as the circles and lines that form letters bear a resemblance to spiders, this evokes a fear of language.

At Primary School Mary was given tests to assess her reading and writing age: “ah hud a reading age of 6.4 and a spelling age of 5.7”. This causes the reader to feel sad for Mary because of the way she was categorised and humiliated. Mary is helpless and alone because she has no one to talk to and she receives no understanding from her school, as mentioned before. The standardised tests make things much harder for Mary and she feels even more ‘different’ from her other classmates. The school do not realise the affect the tests have had on her and do not grasp that they are not going to help anyone in any way.

When Mary goes to High School matters begin to get even harder for her. Not all teachers understood her difficulties and a few have no sympathy for her at all: “French teacher took wan look at the dug’s dinner ah wis producing an tellt me no tae bother”. Her teachers did not know how to deal with her. In history her teacher, Miss

Niven, allowed Mary to continue to draw hieroglyphics when the others in the class were progressing with the next topic: “and the rest ae the class moved on tae the Second World War but ah stayed in Ancient Egypt, stuck in a coarner a the room wi a pile a librybooks round me, drawing they wee sideways people”. This did not help Mary whatsoever and by separating her from her classmates her sociability could have been affected and her education would also suffer from missing parts of the course. In other cases the teachers are not so understanding and sympathetic towards Mary. For instance, Mr Kelly was completely intolerant of Mary and had no thought for her feelings: “What point is there in writing something which is utterly unintelligible?”

The fact that Mary was listed on the ‘remmy list’ evoked pity for her: “but maisty them jiiist thoat ah wis a poor wee sowl that couldnae learn oanythin ”. They treated Mary as if she was completely unintelligent and because she could not read or write as well as others there was no point trying to help her achieve success: “so whit wis the point a them tryin to teach me?” “She’s a poor wee soul but she tries very hard. Obviously no bein able tae read makes ye deif”, Mary overheard this comment made by her teacher and received it very maturely and with good-natured humour. Mary believed that they are the stupid ones and she thought that they should acknowledge her intelligence. She recognises their lack of discretion whilst they are talking about her and accepts their comment without getting angry.

Mr Kelly is an arrogant and impatient teacher who prefers to teach children in the traditional approach. The controlling way and fast speed in which Mr Kelly teaches has a negative impact on Mary. Mr Kelly has great significance in Mary’s life and deliberately makes Mary feel unwanted and a nuisance. He particularly picks on

Mary, as she is especially vulnerable and exposed because of her learning disorder. By bullying Mary he feels as if he feels like he has more power as he can mentally squash her without effort. Animal and circus imagery is used to describe the classroom situation with Mr Kelly.

The children in the class are being compared to fast racehorses and obedient circus lions and Mr Kelly is being described as a cruel ringmaster: "If ye kin imagine the class like a field of racehorses then he wus gaun at such a pelt that only the furst two or three could keep up wi him..." the youngsters in the classroom are being compared to racehorses here. The children are writing at a fast speed representing the quick pace at which horses move in a race. There are many children in the class as there are many horses in a race. The simile also suggests that horses compete to finish a race, as are the children to complete the piece of writing. In the classroom the youngsters also face hurdles and not all finish the notes Mr Kelly dictates: this is the same with horses –not all finish a race as there are jumps stopping them. The obstacle in the school pupils' case is their teacher, Mr Kelly. This imagery allows the reader to clearly envisage the scene in the class area with Mr Kelly.

The children are also associated to circus lions: "The class were aw sittin up like circus lions". Circus lions are kept in a caged environment similar to the room in which the pupils are sitting. These animals are trained to do what they are told just as Mr Kelly controls the class. The way that the children are sitting is compared to the straight posture of performing lions; the children are sitting straight up and alert in their seats. This gives a clear image of how the children are positioned and makes them look as if the teacher is controlling them just as lions are tamed in a circus.

Finally, using an extended metaphor, Mr Kelly is described as a 'ringmaster': "wonderin whit the ringmaister wis gonnae dae next". This is a fantastic way to describe the teacher. The ringmaster in a circus controls the animals as does Mr Kelly the pupils he teaches. Mr Kelly is cruel to the children and makes them "jump through hoops" to finish writing, this is just like a ringmaster harshly making lions and other animals perform tricks in a circus, against their own will. The circus is looked upon in a negative way nowadays- humiliation of animals and so on. Mr Kelly is humiliating his pupils and making them do things they find very hard to carry out. As ringmasters perform to an audience, Mr Kelly is performing to the pupils in his class and they are also the animals he trains and forces to perform. The children's response is to try and keep up and fight for their own survival instinctively, just as animals take care of themselves. The image creates sympathy for Mary and her classmates as a result of the reader realising the struggle the children have had to go through in that particular class.

Mary has a very sophisticated way of thinking. Her meta-cognitive skills are shown by the way she questions what she is being taught and this inspires a feeling of admiration for Mary, in the reader. Mary's theory about reading is very wise. She mentions the different way in which she sees letters compared to numbers and cleverly comments on why this is true: "It's funny how the numbers never seem tae birl aroond the way the letters dae; mibby it's because there urny usually as many numbers in a number as there are letters in a word". She also explains how understanding is not limited to reading from left to right: "Mibby if ah lived in wanny thae countries where they wrote doon the way ah'd be aw right. Ah mean no

everybody writes like we dae...some folk read right tae left and some up and doon. And they Egyptians drew wee pictures fur aw their writin.” These theories demonstrate Mary’s intelligence and show that she is not as ‘daft’ as people think. Mary overcomes her communication problems by using pictures (hieroglyphics) to write instead of words: “So ah started tae write about ma journey tae the next world and the hings ah wid take wi me, aw in wee pictures.”

Mary has many admirable traits that are clearly recognised. She is a very practical young girl, organised and imaginative She is also very optimistic and considering her situation I find it very admirable that she can cope so well with the lack of understanding and discrimination she has to deal with, and at the same time manages to remain so happy and care free.

Mary’s commitment to her family is revealed when she is asked to write about her ‘journey tae the next world’ in English and it is very admirable that a girl of her age feels so close to her family and appreciates that she has her mum and sisters. She recognises and is thankful for her mothers love for herself and her sisters: “if ah’d asked her, ma mammy wid say we are her three best hings; Catherine and Elizabeth and me.” When Mary eventually completed her assignment she was very pleased at being able to do something well for once and she feels like she has accomplished something great: “So ah drew a wee picture of masel wi a cheery face on it, pit ma story right on tap ae the pile and planted the whole lot doon in the centre of his desk.” This also shows that Mary does not care about what the teacher might say or do, his unfairness and firmness does not affect her as he would like it to.

The main message the story has conveyed is that there is a wide diversity in people and their learning abilities and this has to be understood by individuals in society: “Aw they different kinds a haunwritin; squinty, straight, big or wee, different sizes and shapes on the page.” The writer is trying to convey this message and the fact that Mary should not get into trouble just because her handwriting is messy and unlike the other children’s. Everyone is different and Mary should not be discriminated against. The handwriting is a metaphor for people and how different we are. We know Mary is happy being herself at the end of the story by the description of the way she puts her story “right on tap ae the pile and planted the whole lot doon in the centre of his desk” all “wi a cheery face”. We admire Mary for being such a cheery character and proud of all her work. She is overcoming her difficulties and her selflessness and sense of humour about life is extremely admirable.

Mary creates a great mixture of strong emotions in those around her. Although we feel sadness and pity for her due to the challenges she faces, we admire her for her ability to be herself despite the circumstances. I have learnt how important it is for you to be yourself throughout life and not allow others to degrade and upset you intentionally. Mary is a very strong character who manages to overcome the obstacles she has faced so far in her life. The writer’s powerful message to always be yourself no matter what difficulties in your learning you may stumble over was conveyed very well. This point is relevant to everyone’s life because everybody will come across a difficulty in their learning and in their daily lives at some point in their lifetime.