Paper One Rough Draft – Monstrous Spring

Monster: the initial traits that come to mind include ‘large,’ ‘frightening,’ even ‘overwhelming.’ Yet as modern media has shown, monsters can be just as equally misunderstood. It is this plethora of aptitudes that Karen Finneyfrock addresses in her poem “Monster,” The poem takes place over the course of a bus ride, in which a speaker (presumably Finneyfrock) describes the encounter herself and her fellow passengers have with the monster that is Spring. “Monster” is free verse, with no clear pattern of rhyme or rhythm. Instead, Finneyfrock relies on specific, contemporary language and narrative to create the poem’s movement and arc. Over the course of the poem, Finneyfrock uses an array of poetic devices to indicate the different ‘monstrous’ stages of Seattle spring, from animalistic to frightening to sympathetic, creating contrast while also drawing the reader close to the poet’s own experience.

Finneyfrock utilizes style and tone to make the overall experience of the poem accessible to readers. By using a first-person speaker as a guide through the poem, Finneyfrock drops the reader inside the poem itself, allowing them to experience events alongside her. Finneyfrock also fosters a sense of community between herself and the other bus passengers, perpetuated by use of collective pronouns throughout the poem, that the reader becomes a part of. Finneyfrock uses colloquial yet specific and descriptive language to make her poem feel accessible to the modern reader while painting them a vivid picture of the scene she sets. An excellent example of this is in the first stanza: “Even the wet floor of the city bus, that slimy / torso, muddy with mountain spit, challenging each / rider’s ankle to a duel, is romantic on an April afternoon.” The phrase “muddy with mountain spit” in particular is visceral, while managing to give a clear picture of what that bus floor must look like. (Simultaneously in this stanza, Finneyfrock begins to establish the sort of contrast that continues throughout the poem in her labeling of grimy descriptions of mud and slime as romantic – I will return to the significance of this shortly.) Specific word choice and description continues to characterize this poem moving forward. Overall, Finneyfrock’s style and tone draw readers into her poem – perhaps even forcing them to grapple with the ensuing ‘monster’ firsthand.

Finneyfrock’s characterization of Spring as a monster evolves over the course of the poem, fostering tension, movement, and perhaps even shifting perspectives for readers. This begins with Spring’s initial appearance in the poem’s third stanza. “Rearing up on her hind legs in front of the bus, / two feet planted in the Puget Sound, yellow claws / tapping the tops of skyscapers, stands Spring.” Here, Finneyfrock describes Spring as classically animalistic: ‘rearing’ on its hind legs, possessing claws. Yet, other than the bus driver’s initial fright, Finneyfrock does not yet give readers a clear emotional impression of this monster. Readers are unsure of whether it is terrifying or welcome. They must read on. Finneyfrock continues to create contrasts and subvert expectations in the following lines: “Godzilla with a head full of flowers, Gorgon with ivy / for snakes.” The contrast here between allusions to classical monsters and their floral appearances match the larger contrast Finneyfrock crafts in equating ‘monster’ and ‘spring.’ In the next description, Spring appears almost pet-like as she “sniffs the bus, sneezes, licks every tree twice….” Even her fury is pink, accompanied by rhododendron rain; the use of this color and description change the connotation of ‘fury’ into something livelier, gentler. Finneyfrock toys with readers’ expectations of monsters and spring alike in this characterization, impressing on readers the pleasant shock that is the start of spring in Seattle.

However, like spring itself, Finneyfrock’s poem is not stagnant. Her characterization of Spring grows and changes over the course of the poem, preventing readers from settling on any one description. Finneyfrock weaves in frightening imagery to portray the precarious nature of spring, the way it sweeps its way inevitably across Seattle. She first establishes this in her portrayal of the city itself, as seen in the second stanza: “I… cross the bridge beneath / the eye of a volcano, pray an earthquake / doesn't come while we’re on the viaduct, sled the exit ramp into downtown….” The references to natural disasters represent the perilous nature of life in the Pacific Northwest as a whole, the danger that is always lurking. The way the bus ‘sleds’ down the hill offers a similar impression of lack of control. It only makes sense, then, that Seattle spring would have the potential to be similarly catastrophic. This is shown in the following description: “(The bus driver) knows Spring wants / to eat us like fat chickens, sucking the grease from our bones. / She wants to snap our spines before tossing us skulls first into / Summer.” This description is the most classically ‘monstrous’ of any given of Spring, and thus subverts readers’ expectations yet again as they reconsider their original impression of what a monster may look like. As with Seattle itself prior, there is a comparison drawn between Spring’s beauty and danger, capacity to blow through and overwhelm in its abrupt arrival.

Finneyfrock next hones Spring’s supposed menace into a capacity more manageable: the exaggerated anger of a teenage girl. In drawing this comparison, Finneyfrock warps readers’ unease into something more like sympathy as Spring “coats the city / in cherry blossoms so it will look like her messy bedroom....” The transitional phase of adolescence is something all readers will have encountered, if not personally endured. This kind of monster is painfully human, more than any other personification so far. This portrayal is aided by Finneyfrock’s use of language, which throughout the poem has been detailed and specific, but particularly comes into play in the dialogue she gives Spring: “‘I know that slut summer is coming / with her long legs and easy love.’” Finneyfrock takes on traits of the genre of poetic monologue here to distinguish Spring’s voice. The word ‘slut’ in particular stands out as crass in this otherwise rather eloquent poem, and thus works to distinguish the voice of Spring as a character. This voice continues throughout this stanza, concluding with the remark: “‘If you loved me like you should love me, / I would stay here all year.’” With this line, readers suddenly grow remorseful for their prior impressions of Spring as ‘monstrous.’ She seems instead sorrowful, relatable and misunderstood. Especially after this last personification, the poem’s conclusion is particularly melancholy. Spring’s departure is quiet, lonely even: “When she leaves us, she goes / back to the ocean, through the Puget Sound. Only the magnolia trees go with her.” Finneyfrock closes the poem with sympathy for her monster – the word ‘only’ in particular is heavy with loneliness. Despite the havoc Spring has wreaked, the upheaval of lives she has caused, readers are sad to see her go. With the image of Spring as an adolescent still in their minds, they are left with the wistful impression that accompanies growing up and moving on.

In “Monster,” Karen Finneyfrock creates unique contrasts and prompts readers to think further about traditional portrayals of both monsters and spring. The tension in this poem originates from the contrasts she devises in characterizing spring as monstrous, and in her varying portrayals of what a monster looks like. Finneyfrock draws on her own background as a Seattle poet in these characterizations; this poem is not just about spring, but about the specific experience of spring in Seattle. Within this poem, Finneyfrock delivers her own unique perspective on the widely-familiar experience of the season’s turn.