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From Sensible to Foolish

Bel Canto is a book full of character transformations. Starting from Mr. Hosokawa and ending up with all the terrorists, Ann Patchett shows the remarkable transformations that occur within each person. One of the most significant transformations in the novel is made by Gen Watanabe. He starts off as a very capable and sensible young man and in the end transforms into a foolish lovesick boy who gives in to his passions and forgets to think about the current situation.

Mr. Hosokawa had only praise for Gen Watanabe. Despite being just a translator who possessed knowledge of several difficult languages, Gen was also a capable worker. Mr. Hosokawa praised him for doing things that were not even asked of him. Mr. Hosokawa even commented that “When there was nothing that needed translating, Gen simply seemed to take care of things before anyone knew they needed taking care of.” (18).

Mr. Hosokawa was not the only one who praised Gen. Everyone else admired him likewise. The Generals, along with all the hostages, were surprised by his capabilities. General Benjamin even asked him “How did you get to be so smart?” (97). Gen was complimented more than once that was probably nothing that he couldn’t do. Roxanne was even surprised that he couldn’t play the piano. She said “I thought you might... You seem to know how to do so many things.” (122). Gen was very popular as everyone both liked and needed him.

Gen Watanabe's transformations are foreshadowed at the very beginning when a young terrorist holds Roxanne's hand, and, for some reason, it disturbs Gen. Later, when Gen finds out that the young terrorist is actually a girl named Carmen the "anxiousness he had held inside his chest rolled off of him in a long, low wave." (118). After that, Carmen begins closely watching Gen and he catches her doing it. Despite his affinity for languages, Gen feels a loss of words and is too afraid to go up and talk to her. Luckily Messner comes out to help him. As Gen approaches Carmen for the first time he "felt a peculiar fluttering in his chest, a sensation that was not entirely dissimilar to an itch but was located just beneath his ribs." (147).

The real transformation begins when Carmen approaches Gen first. At night, when Gen is sleeping, Carmen lies down beside Gen and whispers in his ear. One of Gen's first thoughts when he wakes up is how close she is to him. He could have "kissed her without moving an inch" (159). This thought shows how Gen Watanabe is beginning to fall in love. When Gen saw Carmen's smile he begins to doubt the reality of this event. He begins thinking that it's only a dream and asks himself "Had he wanted her and not known it. Had he wanted her so much that he dreamed she was lying beside him now?" (159).

After that night Gen Watanabe's thoughts are only filled with Carmen. He looks for her first thing in the morning. He worries when he doesn't know where she is. He gives Beatriz his watch so that she wouldn't bother him in his worries over Carmen. When unprepared food is offered to the hostages, Gen stays in the kitchen even though he is not needed there. He makes an excuse for himself by saying that he could wash vegetables or just stir something. He stays behind because he wants to talk with Carmen. In the kitchen Gen approaches Carmen and they agree to a specific time to hold a study session.

In the beginning of the hostage ordeal Gen said that he was tired. The Generals were bothering him by always calling him to translate and even to type up their demands. Other people were always asking him to interpret for them. Gen felt a loyal obligation to Mr. Hosokawa and tried to keep up his services for him. Gen Watanabe was a very busy person and he was growing weary of it. However, when Carmen became his main concern his tiredness seemed to go away. Gen begins sacrificing his hours of rest during the night so that he can study with her. He even begins neglecting his duties as a translator when he ignores Victor Fyodorov and begins kissing Carmen. Later his translations become lazy because Gen is only thinking about Carmen.

In the bathroom where he and Carmen share their first kiss Gen makes note of his own transformation. He notices his reflection in the mirror. In his face is a “love that was so obviously displayed that she must already know everything there was to know about it.” (207). Gen is now in love. He is beginning to lose his sense of reality in this closed off world. He begins playing the role of Romeo in a different version of Romeo and Juliet. He is not the loyal bachelor that he once was. He has other things on his mind now.

The final transformation comes when he and Carmen get intimate outside in the grass at night. In Gen’s recollection he remembers that night in two versions. The first version is from the point of a sensible person who is thinking about the future more than the present. The second version is what actually happened from the point of a lovesick man in passion. Gen is no longer a sensible person. He has changed completely. He has broken across the imposed borders between terrorists and hostages. He has given way to his passion. He is no longer the Gen Watanabe that he was in the beginning of the story.

From the time Gen was intimate with Carmen until her death, Gen lost all his sense of reality and sensibility. He became a foolish boy. At nights, when he and Carmen were supposed to study Spanish and English, they make love with each other instead. Sometimes, they do it more than once. Gen begins thinking naively about the consequences of the hostage ordeal. When Messner comes back one last time to argue with the generals about the surrendering Gen foolishly says “It is a standoff...maybe a permanent one. If they keep us here forever, we’ll manage.” Messner is shocked facing this transformation in a person he originally thought was reasonable. He replies to Gen’s statement “Are you insane? You were the brightest one here once, and now you’re as crazy as the rest of them.” (302-303).

When the guns began shooting Gen was still naïve and his head was still stuck in the clouds. When the chaos was happening Gen told himself that Carmen was clever. That she would be the able to escape. He thought that she had probably devised a plan which would allow her to escape. Foolishly he cried out that “She is my wife. She is my wife.” (313). It was the only plan for her that he came up with. However, the transformed Gen had lost his reason. The person he had been in the beginning would have been able to understand that it was a hopeless cause and that the hostage situation would have never ended well. It was the transformed, foolish, lovesick, naïve version of him that didn’t see the full situation.

Ann Patchett illustrates how Gen slowly changes from one person into a completely different person. He was calm and sensible in the beginning. He was a person that could be depended on who thought things through, and he even said the ordeal will be hard on everyone. At the end of the novel, Gen forgot that the ordeal would be hard, and he was living with a fantasy expectation of the outcome. In the words of Messner, Gen Watanabe changed from a bright young guy to an insane person.

Works Cited

Patchett, Ann. *Bel Canto*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008. Print.