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Kambili's Puzzle Thus Far...

Everyone has seen or put together a puzzle, but has anyone thought of a quest being a puzzle. When focusing on a quest one should think of what Thomas C. Foster states on page four of his novel *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: Revised Edition* “when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something’s going on there.” To identify what Foster considers to be a quest, one has to have a clear understanding of the novel and which character is on this quest. There are five steps that Foster lays out; to start one has to identify the quester - in simple terms state which character is on this quest, after that is identified one needs to state the place the character is trying to go. After one identifies the first two steps finding the last three are a bit easier, the third step is figuring out the reason the character is going to that place previously identified in step two. Step four coincides with step three because here one identifies some of the challenges that the character faces along the way. Step five is the final step, and the toughest to identify because this step is showing that the character has reached the point of self-actualization. In *Purple Hibiscus*, written by Chimamanda Adichie, the first person narrator and protagonist Kambili is on a quest. However, Kambili’s quest does not fulfill all five of the requirements Foster laid out. Instead, Kambili completes the first four steps, leaving the fifth step to happen after the novel has finished.

Starting with the border of the puzzle, one has to identify all of the edge pieces and work their way in. The same is with Foster's steps for a quest, the first thing needed is to state the character that is going on this quest. In Adichie's novel this character is Kambili, but the reasoning on why one may say she is the quester comes as the dots are connected between each step. For instance, one knows that Kambili is a fifteen-year-old girl, raised in a Catholic household, living with her parents and her brother Jaja. Her father is a stickler on having everyone in their family obeying the rules he has laid out, some of them are derived from the ten commandments and others are just rules Papa has made up. To understand why Kambili is the character on this quest, and why she never reaches self-actualization is where the rest of the puzzle comes into play.

The second part of the puzzle is forming a small section of the big picture and finding where it fits. For Foster the second part is figuring out the place the character is going. For Kambili she is not necessarily going to a distinct place in the novel, meaning that she goes from place to place within each portion of the puzzle. One place that she may want to go is school, Papa is always pushing her to do her best in school. Kambili cannot ruin the family's name by being number two in class, which forces her to push to the limits until she reaches the top spot. An example of how Papa reacts when Kambili is not number one is when Kambili shows Papa her report card, Papa is disappointed and Kambili knows that, she had thoughts racing through her brain stating, "I wanted to say I came second so that he would know immediately, so that I would acknowledge my failure, ... He seemed to take forever to open it and even longer to read it. I tried to pace my breathing, as I waited, knowing all the while that I could not" (Adichie, 40). She knew how Papa was going to react, but school is only one piece of the puzzle of

self-actualization. Kambili was great at school work, and knew she had it in her to be number one, so the place she needed to go to piece this puzzle together is school. So far one knows which character is on a quest, and where they believe this character is going to go. To continue piecing the puzzle together one needs to state a reason on why the character is going to the place that was identified.

If someone were to come and ask for a reason why this puzzle is being put together there are many different answers. Apply that knowledge to the quest leading to self-actualization, there are many possible reasons to go on a quest. For Kambili though, one may see that she wants to get approval from Papa. Papa is the type of father that knows the abilities of his children, and will push them to reach what he knows their capable of. Kambili is trying to get to that point of self-actualization, but she wants the approval from Papa, and she will not stop until she knows that Papa is happy with her work. She will jump through any hoop that may come her way, and if she falls she picks herself up off of the ground and starts again. Giving up is not an option that Kambili has, she wants Papa to be proud to call her his daughter. Every puzzle has pieces that may seem like they fit together, but they don't. Even with setbacks that doesn't stop the person from finishing the puzzle. Kambili is trying to piece together everything that makes her the person that she is.

No puzzle is completed without misplacing some of the pieces. Same with quests, if there is something that causes frustration or anger, it is probably there because they have misplaced a piece of their puzzle. For Kambili, a lot of the missing pieces come from Papa, one can only hope that the abuse that Papa inflicts on her is for a reason, but sometimes Papa gets carried away with his abuse and ends up abusing his family to the point of no return. If Papa thinks that

anyone has misplaced a piece of their puzzle, he will beat them until he has let his anger out, an example of this is when Kambili is on her period and Mama lets her eat right before mass. She knew that if Papa were to find out that there would be a beating, and there was. Papa ended up taking off his belt and hitting Jaja, Mama, and Kambili across the back (Adichie, 102). Another missing piece of the puzzle is when Papa is telling Kambili and Jaja that they cannot go see their grandfather Papa Nnukwu because he believes his father is a sinner, “I don’t like to send you to the home of a heathen but God will protect you” (Adichie, 62). Every puzzle piece that Kambili gets thrown at is what is helping her get to that last step of self-actualization. As with any puzzle, one may try to force a piece to fit in the wrong spot causing anger and frustration.

Digging deeper into Kambili’s puzzle here’s an example of what she hears while Papa is beating Mama, “I was in my room after lunch...when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents’ hand-carved bedroom door,” (Adichie, 32). Having to listen to Papa physically abuse Mama, Kambili started to let her in drift off knowing that it will stop soon, or that it truly isn’t happening. Papa has very high expectations for the entire family, and if someone does not meet the expectation, his anger gets the best of him. Kambili has many times where the puzzle piece is not in the right place, and Papa beats her until the piece is in its right place.

At one-point Papa was forcing a piece of Kambili’s puzzle into the wrong place, but he ended up beating her to the point of her having to be hospitalized. This beating came from the fact that Kambili brought a painting of Papa-Nnukwu into the house knowing that Papa would beat her if he found it, once Papa found the painting and ripped it to pieces is when Kambili was getting beaten, “The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka’s music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty

singing” (Adichie, 210). This beating was unusual for Papa as Mama states, “It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before” (Adichie, 214). Papa had kicked the life out of Kambili because she wanted to have a painting of her grandfather. This painting was one way that she could try to piece her puzzle together, knowing farewell how Papa felt about Papa-Nnukwu. While still in the hospital Kambili still had to succeed in school, it was the one thing that she knew fit in her puzzle. She knew that Papa had to find a way to keep her up to date with school work, “My private tutor came the following week. Mama said Papa had interviewed ten people before he picked her” (Adichie, 214). The tutor was a way of helping Kambili get over this bump in the road, and to help her get to the end goal of any quest, self-actualization.

There was more to the family struggles that challenged Kambili throughout the novel, all there because Papa was stubborn and wanted everyone to follow the Catholic ways. He was not proud of where he came from, and he tried his hardest to keep his children away from Papa-Nnukwu. But one-day Auntie Ifeoma wanted to bring the children to meet Papa Nnukwu, Papa let them go under one condition, “Papa closed the Bible. ‘Kambili and Jaja, you will go this afternoon to your grandfather’s house and greet him. Kevin will take you. Remember, don’t touch any food, don’t drink anything. And, as usual, you will stay no longer than fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes’” (Adichie, 61). However, that fifteen minutes came and went, eventually Jaja and Kambili realized that they had stayed longer, and once Papa found out, he was furious, and the children knew that punishment was on its way. Kambili walked upstairs into the bathroom to find Papa telling her to get into the bathtub, she knew it was coming but did not realize the extent to which she was getting punished.

He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen... The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (Adichie, 194).

Kambili now has burns on her feet from the boiling water and is still expected to go to school and take back being number one in her class. All of these punishments came from small events along the way, Kambili is trying to make sense of what Papa wants from her. But she has no idea how to fit every piece of her puzzle into the correct place without getting punished by Papa.

As her quest to succeed in school continues, she never completes her puzzle, meaning she never got to the point of self-actualization. Her puzzle is still being pieced together every single day. But when the children find out that Papa was found lying dead at his desk, they were confused (Adichie, 286). Both Jaja and Kambili now have a chance to start over, their partly completed puzzles can be taken apart with no fear of punishment. Papa was gone for good, but the children do not know how to act about Papa truly being dead. As the story of how Papa died unravels, the children find out that Mama has been poisoning Papa for months, “Mama tightened her wrapper, then went to the window; she kept pushing the drapes aside, checking that the louvers were shut to keep the rain from splashing into the house. Her movements were calm and slow. When she spoke, her voice was just as calm and slow. ‘I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor’” (Adichie, 290). Every puzzle isn’t finished within minutes of starting it, sometimes taking the puzzle apart

and starting over is needed. Kambili never reached the last puzzle piece for a quest because her puzzle has the chance to start over, she can make a new life for herself.

Every character has a story to be told, but not every story is complete by the end of the novel. *Purple Hibiscus* is a great example of how a quest is not truly finished for the character. Adichie lets Kambili have the opportunity to start her puzzle over, she can go choose a different one to start and piece that one together. Every story end differently, and no two stories are the same. This can also apply to a quest. Some quests are able to be completed on the first go around, other times there is a chance to start over. Just think about the quest that someone is on, maybe they had the chance to create the life they wanted. Kambili did, and Adichie may not honestly know when she is going to finish the puzzle, but for now one can come up with their own puzzle for Kambili to complete.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Anchor Books, 2003.

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: Revised Edition*. Harper Collins,

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Integrity Statement

“I affirm that I have adhered to the college’s expectations for integrity in the completion of this paper”

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