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A Long Way Gone

People use hundreds of inanimate objects every day; some much more than others and are far more significant than others. For example, a student uses a pencil or pen every day. A mother uses a kitchen every day. A soldier uses a weapon every day. But has anyone ever stopped to think who he/she would be without those daily, inanimate objects? Writers use the repetition of a few key objects in books to build or highlight central themes throughout the story. This is the case in Ishmael Beah’s A Long Way Gone. A gun is used as a significant inanimate object that is Beah’s form of comfort, protection, and is the physical representation of the damage Beah inflicts during the war. It becomes a major part of his and other boy soldier’s identity.

Beah writes in the gun and describes it as the character’s only form of comfort at that time. For example, in the scene of Beah’s first attack, Beah was scared. “Tears had begun to form in [his] eyes, but [he] struggled to hide them and gripped [his] gun for comfort” (116). He is afraid of what is about to happen and has nothing but his gun to feel better. This gun continues to be his form of comfort in these confusing times and Beah learns to become attached to the gun, like a child would be attached to a certain blanket. It is used as his protection and comfort. Beah writes, “my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed” (126). By this point in the book Beah’s only concern is survival and his gun is the object that keeps him alive; a protector. This is when the reader realizes that Beah has transformed into a soldier and identifies himself with his gun and how many people he is able to kill with that gun.

Through the book Beah is told by the corporal that “this gun is your source of power” (124). This teaches him that his gun will bring him power and success by killing others and, therefore, will bring him the respect of his peers. The gun is also a representation of his lack of emotion as he transforms into a killer. For example, in the scene of Beah’s first attack before he has killed anyone he says, “I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man,” This is shortly followed by “I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. I shot everything that moved” (119). This shows the reader that the gun is used as a way to release his anger and have no emotion whatsoever over the devastating result. Beah, along with other boy soldiers, use these deaths and their guns to gain respect and have fun. The reader sees an example of this when Beah is speaking with another boy soldier. “The soldier said ‘I killed the owner of this gun in our last raid. He took out a lot of us before I could get him. Since then I have used it to do some damage myself.’ He chuckled, and we high-fived each other and laughed” (127). Killing people and the use of guns became a form of respect and entertainment for the soldiers. This is why the boys learned to identify themselves with their guns; it’s all they had.

In A Long Way Gone, Ishmael Beah uses inanimate objects to highlight the theme of lost innocence and the transformation of a boy into a soldier. The most prominent object is Beah’s gun and its representation of emotion, respect, and Beah’s overall damage in the war. It is also a source of comfort and protection for Beah. These are the reasons that Beah and other soldiers learn to identify themselves with their gun, because they don’t have anything else to give them protection, comfort, or gain them respect. This is why inanimate objects are significant to stories and character development; they build and identify themes and attributes in characters.